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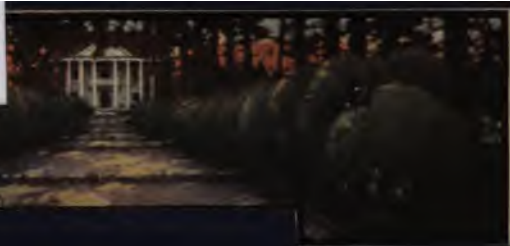
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“THEY SAT DOWN IN THE ENTRY OF AMY’S HOUSE AND TALKED. THAT IS, JIM TALKED . . . OF HIS ‘PAST’ IN RUCKERSVILLE . . . IT WAS NO MORE THE TRUTH THAN ANY OTHER MAN’S ‘PAST’ IS THE TRUTH THAT HE TELLS TO A WOMAN”

THE RECORDING ANGEL

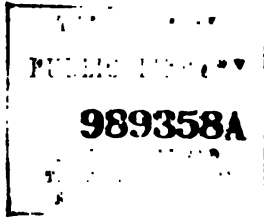
BY
CORRA HARRIS

Author of "A Circuit Rider's Wife,"
"Eve's Second Husband," etc.



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W. H. EVERETT

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THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS
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TO GEORGIA,
AMONG WHOSE RED HILLS THE AUTHOR WAS
BORN, AND BENEATH WHICH SHE
COULD ONLY REST IN
PEACE AT LAST

WQ R 19 FEB '36

ILLUSTRATIONS

“They sat down in the entry of Amy’s house and talked. That is, Jim talked . . . of his ‘past’ in Ruckersville” <i>Frontispiece</i>	
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THE RECORDING ANGEL

CHAPTER I

IF YOU take a certain train at two o'clock in the afternoon, say, at Twenty-third Street Station in New York, and travel steadily southward till you are an hour behind time, you come to the carmine hills of Georgia — round, soft hills that the grasses love. They are all dyed with the blood of heroes, and divided by cotton fields and broken-down “worm” fences and happy, disreputable-looking negro cabins, and an occasional “white folks” house. The hills do not notice you as you pass. They are suckling the grass. They are asleep in the golden sunshine. They are dreaming in the perfume of the cotton blooms. You would not be astonished if one of them should turn over and stretch and show the other breast, they are so very comfortable, so very fertile and lazy. No wonder that every train coming southward in this direction loses time. You cannot “stoke” even a New England engine enough to make it hurry in such an atmosphere of repose and somnambulance. You have missed your dinner at Mount Airy, but it makes no difference. You are not hungry. You are breath-



ing the manna-laden air of imaginary plenty. You begin to feel poetical. You hum an old Southern tune. This is an indication that you are nearing Ruckersville, Georgia, where the scenes of this story are laid.

You will know when the train nears Ruckersville by the cotton warehouses in the suburbs, and the suburbs are only one block from the centre of the town, which you will also recognize by the Daddisman Hotel on one side and the stores on every side, and by a curious, duck-legged statue dedicated to the heroes in gray, which squats in the middle of the square. It — the town — is admirably situated to have developed into a flourishing city. But your aristocrat never builds a city. He can ride against one and conquer it, and he can save it from an invading army, but he has neither the patience nor the energy to build one. It takes a parvenu, or at least a Yankee, to do that. And Ruckersville was settled by a Dublin aristocrat who came over hurriedly with Gen. James Oglethorpe, to avoid offensive financial difficulties at home.

This is how the place grew for three generations merely according to its birth rate. And it was an amazingly large town when you took that fact into consideration. No one moved into it from the outside except by marriage, any more than a business man would move into a dream to speculate. It grew amazingly, like a pumpkin vine, in every direction except the one which led to factories and progress. The first thing a stranger notices is that it was evidently set-

tled first by a set of headstrong families, and then laid off into streets to accommodate the east and west whims of their prejudice and pride. This was due to the fact that these families were nearly all related to one another, each asserting its independence, antagonism, or contempt of the blood bond, after the manner of relatives, who are known to hate each other more than any other class of people in the world. Thus, the Fanning-Rucker residence is built with its back door opening before the distant face of the Rucker-Martin residence, on account of the fact that Mrs. Fanning-Rucker was a Fanning before her marriage and took this means of expressing her contempt for all other Ruckers after the death of her husband because they had objected to his marrying her on the ground that the Fannings "had nothing to recommend them but their money." This elevation of her back-door nose had, in turn, compelled the Rucker-Martins to add a side front to their house and change the direction of the street so that they could go out of the front gate in the morning without smelling Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's breakfast dishes and without seeing her kitchen sink. No street in Ruckersville ever knew the day or the hour when it would be changed to accommodate some outraged emotion. Marriage, in fact, inspired the geometrical topography of the town and accounted for the amazing number of elbows in the streets and for the numerous long fore-arms of them between dwellings. You may live immediately next door and on a straight fifty-foot line

with a stranger or a friend, but when it comes to relatives the situation is different. The dominant Ruckersville instinct was to shrug its architectural shoulders, to build the verandas with averted gaze, and to keep enough distance between its habitations to discourage a gad-about hen in case she fancied the crowing of the rooster in the next door yard. No mixing of chickens was tolerated.

Thus the town stands, insufferably erect, supported by long-shanked verandas, showing a tribal reserve in its distances, shaded by immense trees at irregular intervals, divided by long, crooked, white streets that are magnificently fringed with weeds and goldenrods. And in season it is pervaded by the perfume of cotton blooms from the surrounding cotton fields, and at all seasons by the male odour of tobacco smoke. The only truly busy inhabitants there until quite recently were the bees, who did a thriving business and created annually frightful family disturbances by swarming and deserting one Rucker's hives for another Rucker's hives. This was considered personal by the respective owners of the hives, and gave rise to bitterness, all the more lasting because the Ruckersville bees appeared to have inherited their stings from the original cavaliers, were too quick at the thrust, and too fiercely tempered to be meddled with. They hived where they listed and defended themselves with demoniacal frenzy when any effort was made to ding-dong them back home with their former owner's bell. They were invariably supported in their determination to stay

where they were by the Rucker whose hives were completely destroyed by their migratory instinct. There was a devilish little Brigham Young bee drone in the Ruckersville honey business who had in this way alienated some of the best families and nearest relatives. He was said to have descended from an Italian queen bee imported in a cigar box by the grandson of the original settler of Ruckersville. This was Col. Joseph Rucker, who, as I have already intimated, came over with General Oglethorpe, and built his mansion on a grant of land from the king that is now the site of Ruckersville. He was an Irishman, and had a beam in his eye. He was gifted with courage, a poetic genius for "making love," and with a clear-blue optimism. Whatever may be said of Adam, for one I am convinced that Eve was of Irish descent. There was something so naïvely simple and iridescently witty in the way she managed to get Adam out of his innocuous state of innocency and idleness and started in the decent labour of digging and sweating like a proper man for his living. And Col. Joseph Rucker was undoubtedly descended from this maternal line. First, he is recorded as having had a genial genius for inducing others to work and to risk their substance and salvation for his sake. He died, full of honours, at a ripe old age, without ever having put his own hand to the plough, the husband serially of three devoted and industrious women, the father of three sets of children, and the promoter of certain water-power schemes — largely at the expense of others — on Broad River, which flowed like

a sweet Jordan close to the town, but which refused to be bridled, in spite of the fact that nearly every man in the community who was not a direct descendant of the Colonel had mortgaged his homestead in the effort to accomplish this.

Another proof of his optimism was the pattern of architecture he set, which was enthusiastically copied by his neighbours. The original Joseph Rucker mansion still stands in a grove of live oaks upon a gentle eminence near the middle of the village, with its back turned hopefully upon the adjacent cemetery and its front facing the rising sun. It is an immense white house with windy chimneys, many rattling windows, a wide veranda, and weather boarding so carelessly put on that it is a monument to the builder's belief in eternal summer. Not, you understand, that there is no winter weather in Ruckersville, but that there was nothing in the animation of the Colonel which corresponded to cold and inclemency or that could forestall providence with a blanket of storm sheeting. His god was a mint julep deity of his own accommodating creation who made the earth for the pleasure of man, for the cradle care of women, for the beauty of every flower that blows, and for the joy of little children.

At the imminent risk of tiring that class of readers who are accustomed to being humoured by the author with a duel or a scandal in the first chapter, I have been obliged to include this digression about the Colonel because he was either the direct or indirect pro-

genitor of so many of the characters who shall figure in this story, and because he left behind him a strain of morning-mindedness in them which they still retain. There is julep in their veins, the highest courage in their imaginations, and every sort of aimless improvidence in their deeds. It is when the leaven of industry, of accomplishment and progress is dropped into such cake-dough humanity as this that comedy, tragedy, and queer adventure result, and it is of these that I shall write in this story.

I say on this particular day — it was Tuesday, the fourteenth of June, 18—, a stranger alighted from the train who was obviously neither a drummer nor a politician. And no one recognized him for a relative. He had a long-horned-steer expression. He wore a wide-brimmed hat with a leather band buckled around the crown. His eyes held you up like a brace of steel-blue pistol barrels. And the deep double crinkle of the skin above them added a steady directness to their aim. The bottom of his face showed through an ugly red stubble, like the jawbone of an apithocanthropoid. His mouth was glued together in a straight line under a nose that insulted you by its mere shape. It was high, thin, and drawn back at the lower corners of the neatly, delicately turned nostrils, as if he smelled you and found the odour disagreeable. His clothes were conventional, but scandalously ill fitting, like the loose, brown hide of an erect animal. He was bowlegged, as it turned out, from having sat in the saddle for so many years. And he straddled in his gait, with his

feet set wide apart, like a person who has practised walking straight, even when drunk. Altogether, he did not give the impression of being a good man, but at the same time one inferred that he would not brook having his virtues questioned, provided he was in the mood to claim them. If an immense bald eagle had alighted upon the station platform with three inches of spurs sticking out from his feathery legs it would not have created more excitement, more wondering amazement. He stretched himself, covered the row of idlers leaning against the wall of the station with a glance that left them immediately, as if they were of no consequence, swept out over the town and took in the stores, the Bilfire saloon, the Daddisman Hotel, the squatty statue to the heroes in gray, in the centre of the square, beyond the station. It went on down through the emerald twilight of oaks and poplars on every side, among which the long white legs of the piazzas gleamed and proclaimed the quality of the population. Then he undid his mouth, stretched it at the corners, and snickered. This was the only comment he was ever heard to make upon Ruckersville.

The next moment he lifted one thin, sunburnt hand, shoved back his hat brim till a thick lock of fine dark-red hair showed, drew forth an enormous gold watch that was attached to his waistband by a gold miniature trace chain, looked at it, and straddled off along Elbert Avenue with the air of a man who knew where he was going.

As he turned the first corner and was lost to the view of the astonished group at the station, he came upon Miss Mildred Percey. Their eyes met. He passed without lifting his hat. Miss Mildred pressed her hand to her heart. It was a gesture she had which expressed alarm. She always did it when she met a cow in the road or went into a dark room at night where a man might be concealed under the bed. She went on, wondering who the stranger was. Also, she wondered if he were married. This is the difference between men and women. When a man looks at a woman he knows instinctively at once whether or not she is married, and usually he does not concern himself to register the impression into anything so definite as a thought. But when a woman looks at a man old enough to have a beard on his face, and young enough not to be gray, she cannot tell whether or not he is single, and she always wonders, especially if she is single herself. Miss Mildred was not married. But she was thirty-five. Therefore, she continued more and more to speculate, as she crimped along with her short, mincing steps, concerning the rude stranger who had not lifted his hat to her. Again she placed her hand upon the fat outer bosom of her heart. She had fallen in love and did not know it. She had often fallen this way before, but no one had ever asked her to marry him. At the same time, no man had ever passed her before without lifting his hat.

It is a fact that she was thirty-five, but she denied it with every art known to Ruckersville femininity.

She wore an agonizingly tight corset, a severely firm bust supporter, and beautiful slippers too small for her feet. Her outer garments were loose and sweetly flowing to deny the lacing within. An exquisite and expensive blond braid permitted a few of her own locks to escape negligently in waves about her naturally pretty ears, and they supported a gracefully youthful cherubim hat upon her head, the crown of which was naively garlanded with a wreath of wild roses. She had large, prayerful, blue eyes, a tender, lonesome-looking mouth, good teeth, and a lovely chin, round, soft, with a disposition to quiver when she was moved by any kind of emotion. Her nose was not her own. She had merely inherited it, without being strong enough to change it, from a distant male Rucker ancestor, and it really accounted for her not being married. It was too high, too thin, too long. It was a kind of physical libel upon the gentleness of her disposition which she could not conceal as she did the natural ampleness of her bosom. This she did not want or deserve either, and it had also been inherited from her habitual child-bearing forebears. On this particular afternoon she was powdered and painted a little. She was on her way to the regular weekly meeting of the "Woman's Club."

The stranger did not know that he had passed Miss Mildred Percey. He was engaged with his own reflections. He advanced leisurely, insufferably so, along the shaded avenue, looking first at one house, then another. Apparently he recalled the row of

ancient boxwood in the Rucker-Martins' garden, or it may have been the ivy on the giant chimneys at either end of the house. He paused before the gate of the Misses Yancey's residence and squinted so insolently at the iron Juliet galleries which surrounded the upstairs windows that the two sadly mature maidens within paused in the preparations they were making at their mirrors, before going to the "Woman's Club," and stood trembling with alarm behind drawn curtains. An awful-looking man standing at their front gate in broad daylight, staring speculatively at their windows and doors, meant that they must look under every bed and in every closet for him before they retired that night. Also, it meant that they would not sleep soundly for thinking about him.

Meanwhile, you will understand, of course, that the stranger at the gate was not thinking of anything so timid as an elderly maiden. He was looking at an immense rose vine that covered the Juliet galleries and flirted a thousand pink-hearted yellow blooms in the soft summer air. He was studying the delicate, feminine, many-branched symmetry of a row of pink crepe trees behind the house, against which it rose like a picture upon an old faded valentine. At last he lifted his folded arms from the gate frame and resumed his walk. The Misses Yancey let go their stifled breaths, resumed their toilets, and knew they would be late at the "Woman's Club," not only because they had been interrupted in their dressing, but because they must delay still longer to lock every door

and bar every window lest the dreadful-looking character should return in their absence and enter the place, conceal himself, and be ready to rob and kill them the minute night fell upon their defenceless state.

“The house will be like an oven when we return if we close it,” said Miss Agnes, the younger of the sisters, as she dabbled her nose afresh with powder, because the excitement through which she had just passed had caused it to perspire.

“Still, two unmarried women living alone cannot afford to take any chances with a person like that hanging around,” said Miss Mary, the elder, as she slammed her wardrobe door and locked it.

“Of course not,” returned Agnes, sensitively, as if she thought that her sister thought she wished to take chances at some unimaginable adventure. She had once been secretly in love with an ungainly young blacksmith who was accustomed to pass the house, and she was always afraid her sister would discover her innocent romantic digression.

CHAPTER II

BY THIS time the stranger had reached the edge of the town — that is to say, he had entered a pasture through a sagging wagon gate, and was walking along a path which led to a “worm” fence on the other side. Four red cows and a bull regarded him attentively. The cows held their heads up, but the bull lowered his and blew upon the ground with his nose. This not having the effect of hastening the intruder, he pawed it with his heavy hoofs and gave a deep guttural bellow. The man condescended to observe him. This was in itself an offence. He horned the grass, and bellowed again with all the different notes of ferocity in bull-bellowing. The man refused to take to his heels. This convinced the bull that a rival had entered his preserves. There was nothing to do but curl his tail over his back and charge. He did it. The man side-stepped, stooped, caught him by the under jaw and the horn on the other side of his head, and gave his neck a twist. The bull lost consciousness in the somersault which followed. When he recovered he was lying in the grass at full length with a taste of tobacco on his tongue. The man was some distance farther down the path. The four cows had not moved or changed expression. They were femi-

nine, they had been milked. They knew the man better than the bull did, who knew only himself. They were not indignant at the man nor critical of the bull. They enjoyed the peculiar satisfaction of mere observers. You will have noticed the same silent satisfaction in a certain class of women when two men fight.

There was a crack in the fence sufficiently wide to admit the body of a man, and sufficiently narrow to exclude, say, that of the bull. The rail above and below it were sleek and indicated the hospitality of those, whoever they were, that lived beyond. The stranger flung one leg over the lower rail, bent his body supplely through the crack, and drew the other leg after him. He passed into an oat field, ruffled into green waves by the wind. The path was fringed with sassafras bushes and red sumac. He broke off a twig of sassafras and began to chew the sweetly scented bark. He was approaching another wagon gate that opened at the back of a house of that peculiar gray that white paint turns when it has not been renewed in twenty-five years. There was the skeleton of an old carriage standing just inside, with the iron tires of its wheels lying in dark circles on the grass and its shafts elevated in a kind of horseless lament. A hen flew cackling off her nest under the seat. Then a dog began to bark somewhere out of sight. In front, the house, with the cornices and fluted columns, had the appearance of a fine old lady who has seen better days and remembers them. An immense elm stood in the foreground like

an elderly gentleman in waiting, who had been left there ages ago for this purpose. You understood at once why the only gateway was at the back. It would have been an impertinence to have approached such a house from the front. Only the sun did that when it was rising in the morning over the opposite hill.

The stranger stood beside the old carriage frame, resting one hand upon it. The dog that had barked came forward and licked the other hand. It was a hound. He was like a man overtaken in a dream. This was really the case. He was suddenly hypnotized by the boy he had been in the old house so many years ago, by the shadows that lay unchanged upon the grass, by the little singing sound the brook made at the bottom of the hill. For the first time the sad consciousness of the prodigal invaded him, a sort of pang as he remembered his mother, seen so often between the fluted columns of the old hooded porch as she called, always called, him "back home," after the manner of mothers. Vaguely he began to wonder what would have happened if the first prodigal's mother had met him instead of his father. He felt that it would have been much more difficult for the prodigal. She would never have rejoiced, nor forgiven him with a ring on his finger, but she would have done it with tears, and in clinging to him would have reminded him of every sin he had committed. Man that is born of woman cannot help himself. So far, there is no other way to get born. Otherwise, few of them would risk the loss

future obligations to be just good that it entails. Especially, the prodigal would not risk it. When you have been in the far country having a damned but good time, it is easier to meet your father upon your return than your mother. A father is always so much nearer, more intelligently kin, to a prodigal than any female relative can be. He discovered that, while he mourned the death of his father, he was glad his mother was dead and where she really belonged.

But life has a curious way of adding apocryphal passages to the ancient scriptures which are quite as effective as if Moses had put them in. Suddenly he perceived what he had not observed before, the figure of a woman seated upon the porch, a woman who belonged not to any scriptures, but to far more ancient history, when the life of man is neither moral nor immoral, but merely life. She sat silent, serene, mysterious, with her eyes fixed upon him with that strange authority of the Delilahs, Jezebels, and Cleopatras. And in the first instant of that imperative gaze he ceased to be the prodigal. He was a grotesquely modern giant, shorn of his other strength. He was a poor young buck-ram Antony in top boots who had forgotten his empire. When some men fall in love they discard civilization. They are of no service to the nation, their instincts belong merely to the race. But a peculiar kind of woman is required to inspire this ardent reversion to type. You will know them by this — their lovers never indite love sonnets to them, never sing troubadour songs beneath their casements,



“FOR THE FIRST TIME THE SAD CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE
PRODIGAL INVADED HIM”

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never confess their sins to them, never appeal to the maternal in them, as men do when they are courting mere virgins that are always most easily reached through their cradle-rocking instinct. A woman of this kind invariably swaddles and nurses her lover and husband until she has an infant of her own composition to engross her attention. Then she neglects the husband and devotes herself more exclusively to the real baby. Fortunately for the good of the country, of any country, most women are of this class. They make merely faithful wives and devoted mothers. The other kind make faithful husbands and dangerous wives, and they do not often bear children. If Cleopatra had become a mother, Antony would have bundled her and the infant up and gone back home in time to save Rome. Or, he would have left her to follow him, which she would surely have done.

The woman who sat upon the porch holding the gaze of our hero was one of those finished products of nature. She was virgin and good, but the angels had had nothing to do with this circumstance. She willed her own righteousness to suit her own convenience. She was the feminine incarnation of red and gold which is indescribable. Her head was lifted like a graceful summit upon which the sun seemed to shine forever. This was due to an abundance of light-coloured hair, arranged with insolent severity above a face which, in spite of its fairness, gave an impression of shade, of darkness, of the place where the sun did not shine. This may have been due to the fact that her eyes were

very large, deep brown, and overhung by thick brows of the same colour. The length of these brows was amazing, and they curved like the wings of a swallow stretched in flight. The impression of mystery was given more particularly by the mouth. There was no revelation in it such as women usually make. The lips were beautiful, red, thick, and firmly closed, as if she were determined to have it all from you and confess nothing herself. This was really the case. Every young man in Ruckersville for ten years had told her more than he knew about himself, had prayed to her, and had died for her, figuratively, in vain. She did not even sympathize or offer to be a "sister." She simply watched them through their romantic epilepsy like a trained nurse feeling their pulse and charting their symptoms. It may be that she was interested, but certainly she had never been "moved." One thing some men never understand, that it is useless to appeal to the tenderness of a woman who is made and put together without a single dimple and the lines of whose features are as regular and symmetrical as if she had been chiselled instead of being born of flesh and blood. They have no tenderness. They have merely intelligence and passion. They never make the concession even of coquetry. They are singular human pyramids full of the silent secrets of former creations. They are the deep hieroglyphics of femininity undecipherable by either themselves or others, which is just as well. When a personality gets as ancient as that, it does not belong to us and should be left to those archaeolo-

gists of human nature, the psychologists. Lovers are the only people in the world who do not know this. Women abominate the mysterious in woman, and show it. Children instinctively avoid them. But a man will wear himself to the bone in order to discover them. They appeal to the same spirit of adventure in him which makes him freeze to death trying to discover the north pole. The difference in the hallucination is that your Peary does not expect to find a good fire and a warm bed awaiting him at the end of his journey, but your lover does.

The man who was now staring at the slim white figure of the woman on the porch, and who experienced the distraction of having her gaze back at him with a frankness as old as life, resisted as long as he was able the temptation to advance and address her, for he felt sure she would not speak to him. Then he turned, went back to the gate, paused again with the indecision which blood sometimes makes, quite irrespective of one's brain, then took his way through the oat field. He was accompanied by the dog. A dog, particularly a hound, loves the vagabond in man.

As he passed through the pasture the bull turned his tail to him and pretended not to know he was going by. If you cannot kill your rival, the only self-respecting thing to do is not to recognize his existence. This accounts for the dignified indifference many a man shows to his enemy. We are all really ferocious in this particular. Civilization has only taught us the same intelligence of discretion which the bull practised.

The man saw nothing, neither the tail of the bull, nor the mildly inquisitive stare of the cows, nor the path his feet trod. He was in love and knew it. It is a sensation that a man recognizes and admits and that a woman fears and denies. He was murmuring "damns" and other profane terms softly to himself as a monk recites his prayers. He knew that a disaster had overtaken him, that he was no longer moral, but merely a lover not in possession; that from this moment his life, his aims in it, would be controlled not by his will, but by his passion. It is the same predicament that a wolf experiences when, while loafing carelessly near a sheepfold, suddenly feels his hind leg snatched from him in a trap. If he is wary, however, he keeps silent. He does not howl till the owner of the sheep comes and kills him. This was why the man whispered his "damns." He still hoped to escape, as every man does when he first falls in love.

Night had fallen when he again entered the square and made his way to Bilfire's saloon, leaned across the bar, and held up three fingers to a white-aproned, poppy-faced youth behind it. The dog was anxious to introduce him to the four other men present, all friends of his, he intimated with his friendly tail as he wagged himself from one to the other in the hound's deprecating fashion. But the stranger refused to know that any one else was present. He drank in a sort of thundering silence. He set down the glass with a scowl, obviously designed to be his comment upon Ruckersville liquor. As a matter of fact, it was very

good, but he was in pain, the peculiar pain of knowing the nature of love, and yet of having fallen into it. He felt the retchings of an old ideality rising in him above the rottenness of years of license. Involuntarily love phrases belonging to innocency and youth leaped up in his memory, like maidens long imprisoned, suddenly escaping with candles in their hands, running about in his inner darkness. He had loved so often he was tired of loving. Now here it was again, the old unrest. Therefore, he was furious, and, not being of a nature to kick the adoring dog, he scowled at the whiskey and turned his very impressive back upon young Mr. Fanning-Rucker, the rising attorney of Ruckersville, who stood listlessly near, scanning the Ruckersville *Star*, and upon old Mr. Clark Story — the Storys had the misfortune of not being even distantly related to the Ruckers — who, being very poor, had the miraculous gift of being able to figure out upon his cuff how he could and might become immensely rich at any time if cobalt or copper or, to be more precise, gold, should be discovered on his plantation. This lay in red undulating hills upon the edge of the town. He always carried a pocketful of lying, ill-digested stones whose ugly surfaces hinted of sparkling interiors. If Mr. Story had had only one drink he was willing to calculate his fortune tediously upon the copper basis, but if he had had as many as three, he would be content with nothing less than a two-inch vein of pure gold which he believed cropped out halfway down his innocent old well shaft. But,

as I have written, this was June, his cotton was ankle deep in grass, and his corn needed rain. He was discussing the future humbly upon the cobalt expectation in his cow pasture with Mr. Elbert White and Capt. Alexander Rucker-Martin. The three were seated at a deal table in a retired corner of the saloon, with all of Mr. Story's specimens spread out before them, when the stranger who is threatening to become the hero of this tale entered and cast the gloom of his love affairs over the situation, although the victims, of course, did not know the nature or cause of this gloom. They took it as a personal affront, the outer darkness of an impudent stranger who had no right to cast them into it.

Mr. Story paused in his calculations, lifted his childish, rheumy blue eyes at the interruption, which was psychic rather than real, and began to comb his straggling gray beard with his fingers. He was offended. The broad negative back of the man at the bar seemed to deny every hope he had in the world. It was the back of reality turned upon the sweet, old-whiskered face of romanticism.

Colonel Fanning-Rucker lowered his newspaper so that he also contemplated the same offensive back.

After explaining to every one in the room that he had chosen a new master, the dog sat down on one hip, braced himself with his forelegs, poked out his other hind leg, turned his body sideways and began to sniffle diligently in search of a flea somewhere near the root

of his tail. Not a word was spoken until the stranger straddled out.

"Who is he?" quavered old Mr. Story, indignantly, gathering up his specimens and dropping them into the sagging pockets of his alpaca coat.

"Stchranger within our gates, Stchory, that's who he is," hiccoughed Elbert White in that mewling voice peculiar to inebriation.

"Looks like the cross between Satan and a Shanghai rooster to me," laughed Colonel Fanning-Rucker.

All this time Captain Rucker-Martin had been sitting braced against the wall with a drawn-dagger expression upon his little gray shell of a face, his eyes spitting fire as he batted the lids rapidly.

"He — my God, he is an insult!" he exclaimed now in great excitement.

The Captain had a fine treble voice and talked through his nose, but he was known to be a brave man in spite of it. This was all that could be said of him. He belonged to that great class of Southern men who were made and tempered too quickly in the red furnace of war and finished up only for battle-line purposes. He had retired from business without entering it, owing to a gunshot wound received in the back, and from which he suffered tortures. He was very sensitive, as was everybody else in Ruckersville, for that matter. But the difference was that the Captain had once knocked a man down for saying in his presence that Robert Toombs was "no gentleman." This happened long ago, but upon the reputation accruing

to him from the incident he had walked the streets of Ruckersville for nearly forty years, dragging first one wing and then the other, so to speak, and thrashing his gamecock spurs in them. He was so emaciated from his sufferings that his moustache and goatee seemed to bristle from his skeleton. And he would have died happy fighting any day. He had an amiable thirst for blood glory. This fate being denied him, he refused to give up his ghost peacefully in bed, as the doctors predicted whenever he came down again with the old wound. What time he was not seeking a "difficulty" he spent in Bilfire's saloon explaining how he came to be shot in the back instead of in front, where every gentleman is entitled to receive his bullets.

"I tell you, sirs, it was damnable! It was contrary to all the ethics of proper warfare! While we were taking the enemies' breastworks, one of their black-guard regiments charged us from the rear and I was shot down from behind."

At this point in the narrative he invariably appealed to Elbert White.

"You were there, White. You know how I came to have this wound, where no gentleman ought to be insulted with a wound!"

"I wash, Captain! I wash right there," White would sob. "Wherever the red rim of battle blazed there you might have seen Corporal White leadin' the Confederate armies. I lost four of m' legs at Gettysburg and all m' arms at Appomattox."

As a matter of fact, he had never been wounded,

but, when he was drinking, it was his hallucination that he was a centipede and his occupation to lament the different members he had lost in battle. This was very annoying to the Captain, who could never get drunk enough to claim more legs than an ordinary mortal or to forget the disgrace of having been shot in the back.

Colonel Rucker folded his paper, arose from his chair, and sauntered out. He remembered that he had an engagement to call on Sylvia Story that evening and that he had no time to lose. The Storys lived on the old Tinny Bone place, beyond the town. He recalled with some irritation that he must pass through the pasture where the bull was kept. This always made him nervous — not that the animal had ever noticed him. Still, he wished that shiftless old scamp, Clark Story, would at least make a front gate to his place and save visitors the inconvenience of being possibly gored to death when they came in the back way.

But the three old Gracchi determined to follow the stranger and discover who he was and what business brought him. They had been messmates in the Army of Virginia, and messmates ever since in Bilfire's saloon. They had no affairs of their own, so they took a vital interest in those of other people. They borrowed animation and returned it in gossip.

CHAPTER III

THEY entered the wide doorway of Daddisman's Hotel half an hour after the stranger had disappeared through it, three abreast, Elbert White being in the middle, owing to the fact that he did not carry his liquor well. It opened immediately into what was called the "office." This was a large square room of one colour all over. The walls were gray, but decorated with flaming ladies' legs calendars. The ceiling was gray, and the floor was covered with an ashy wornout oilcloth. The stove had not been cleaned since the winter fires died down in it. But this was a convenience. It served as a spittoon. The ashes were long since packed down with tobacco juice. The pipe made an ugly elbow halfway up to the ceiling and was plastered as high as the tallest drummer could reach with advertisements setting forth the merits of everything from chewing gum to breakfast cereals and corsets. A corner of the room was boxed off for the innkeeper's desk and for a counter, upon which rested a glass showcase and the register for the names of guests. Under the glass were exposed several boxes of cigars, little square nickel bags of smoking tobacco, a glass jar of pink and lavender coloured "breath pills," another of

striped sticks of clove and peppermint candy. That which corresponded to the "breath pills" above was concealed in pleasant, gleaming, golden bright rows below the counter. Altogether, it was one of the most alluring spots in the town, because it so completely, and at the same time so discreetly, filled the natural cravings of its male citizens. On the opposite side of the room stood a wide table, long enough to reach past both front windows. The chairs in the room appeared to be humanly related to it. They were always in the position of having been dragged up to it or dragged away from it or of having been kicked under it, owing entirely to the time of day when you observed them. This table had another distinction. Twenty years ago a duel was fought on top of it, an impromptu duel without seconds. It was fought to a finish over a game of cards, with pocket knives, by Tony Adams and Jim Bone. They were both drunk at the time. And Tony had remained drunk ever since. But young Bone, believing that he had killed his friend, disappeared that same night and had never been heard from — a good riddance, everybody said.

"He was born with an open knife between his teeth, same as you say somebody was born with a gold spoon in his mouth," commented old man Adams, who would have been glad if his own son had been able to follow Bone's example in evacuating Ruckersville for the far unknown country of lean prodigals.

Tony was the only person who had ever grieved

for his friend. He was like an overgrown, fair-haired child that Time has jerked off the wagon and left sitting tearfully in the sand. He recovered from his wounds, consisting of various slashes across the arms and breast, but he refused to survive the departure of his friend.

“He might have known I’d have forgiven him. ’Twa’nt his fault, nohow. There were five queens in that deck of kyards and nary one of us knowed it till it was too late to keep him from fightin’ me for drappin’ her on him in the wrong place.”

When Captain Martin and his two companions entered the hotel they saw Billy Daddisman, the keeper, standing behind the counter staring at the open page of the register with horror and amazement clearly depicted in every line of his white pop-eyed face. The three gentlemen from Bilfire’s immediately braced themselves with their stomachs against the other edge of the counter, hurriedly took out their respective spectacle cases, adjusted their glasses upon their noses, and peered at the same page. But here an unexpected circumstance delayed them. It seemed that after they had examined Mr. Story’s new specimens at the saloon Captain Martin had accidentally placed Elbert White’s glasses in his case, and White, who was near-sighted, had gotten the Captain’s, who was slightly cross-eyed in his left eye. The two old roosters cocked their heads in vain this way and that at the name written in flaming headline chirography entirely across the page. They

could make nothing of it. And Story was scuffling with equal futility for even a chance to see what they were looking at. He was very small and timid, and always came last, never saw anything first, lacked the Zaccheus energy of most small men. Martin and White each lifted their eyes to the other, but even then White had to turn his face sideways and cross his left eye before he could make out the features of his friend.

“Damme, sir, you have appropriated my glasses!” exclaimed the Captain, snatching at the little steel-rimmed spectacles he saw on the other man’s nose, and which were entirely too small for his large eye. At the same moment White snatched his own twin moons from the Captain’s nose. They were both furiously red — two very old cocks facing each other with their heads drawn and their neck feathers bristling.

“Hist!” whispered Daddisman, putting out his hands and gently parting them as he would have parted two children. “Don’t fight, for God’s sake! I’ve got the devil in this house and likely enough to have disturbance without your breaking loose!”

Mr. Story had taken advantage of the confusion to duck under the arms of his companions and to get at the register.

“Jim Bone, New Mexico,” he read in his high, piping voice.

“Hist!” warned Daddisman, “he’s just three doors down the hall. He might hear you!”

"Well, 'tain't cussin' jest to call his name, is it?" demanded Story, aggrieved.

"I don't know, but I'll take no chances on it. I've never forgot the night he carved Tony Adams like a raw turkey up there on that table twenty years ago. And he wa'n't more'n sixteen then. If he's kept on the way he started he won't take nothin' offen nobody by this time. I reckon, too, he'll light on you first, Story. You got his pa's place, and you've never paid for it."

This was horrible. Story faded gently into the outer darkness, and was seen no more that evening.

"Did he have anything to say?" demanded the Captain.

"The queerest thing he could have said," replied Daddisman. "He asked me where was Tony Adams."

"In there,' I says, pointing to the trunk room, where Tony always lays when he's sleepin' off his drunk.

"He went in. Then I got uneasy, not knowin' but what that old queen of hearts was still ranklin' in him and that he might be carvin' Tony again. So I stepped to the do' to see what was goin' on."

"Well?" demanded the Captain as Daddisman paused.

"Well, sir, Tony was layin' on the flo' as comfortable as a pig, dead asleep, with his head throwed back and his mouth open, and Jim was squattin' down, starin' at him as if he was lookin' at a man that had changed to a maggit since he seen him last. There wa'n't no danger in his expression, so I tipped back. Presently

he come out and give orders for Tony to be put in the bridal chamber till he was sober, and for me to charge it to him. Cost him somethin', too. Tony'll sp'ile the carpet, sure. Got the weakest stomach when he's drunk of any ——"

Suddenly there was the sound of a heavy body striking the floor above and a yell that pierced the evening air like a distracted caliope.

The three men stiffened with horror as the crash of glass followed and the yells increased. Daddisman ran out into the street, looked up at the window, dashed back into the house and up the stairs.

"It's Tony tryin' to fall out of the winder in his shirttail!" he exclaimed to Elbert and the Captain, who followed him up the steps.

The door of the bridal chamber had been locked to insure the invalid's remaining where he was put till he could make a creditable appearance. Daddisman fumbled desperately with the key in the lock, while the screams of the prisoner became more and more distressing. A crowd was gathering outside. Every one in Ruckersville knew which was the bridal chamber in the hotel, and it was the last place from which such sounds of distress could be expected. At last the door yielded, and the three rescuers entered.

They beheld a scene of the wildest confusion. The brilliant covers of the bridal bed lay upon the floor. Ornaments designed to appeal to the happy, romantic illusions of the newly married were scattered

and shattered. And in the midst of all stood the erstwhile "maggit," in merely an abbreviated shirt. His thin blond hair was erect with horror, his face pallid, his blood-shot eyes distended, and he was perfectly sober.

"What in hell is the matter?" demanded the hotel-keeper.

"Daddisman, oh, my God! I always knew I'd do it some day when I was drunk! But which one did I take?"

He bent forward, resting one hand upon each naked knee, wagged his head from side to side, and wept uncontrollably.

"What are you talkin' about?"

"Don't tell me it was Leonora! And if it's Mary Yancey, I'll kill myself! I never could live with a woman as thin as that!" he moaned.

"Look ahere, Tony, are you seein' snakes?" said Daddisman, advancing and laying a gentle hand upon him.

"I wish I was. I'd prefer 'em. But where is she?"

"Where is who?"

"The bride!"

He straightened himself with an effort and gazed fearfully about the room.

"You ain't married! Git back in bed, you durn fool!"

Tony permitted himself to be shoved down upon the mattress and covered with the flowered spread.

He pulled it up to his chin, looked confidentially from one of his attendants to another, and explained:

"I've been always afraid I'd yield to matrimony when I didn't know what I was doin'. And when I woke up in this here bridal chamber I was plum distracted."

"You shet up!" said Daddisman in deep disgust.

"For God's sake, don't leave me, gentlemen!" moaned Tony as the three men withdrew and the door closed.

Daddisman opened it, thrust his head in, and said:

"You been put in here to git sober. You ain't married. Shet up!"

"But this ain't no place for that. Lemme go!"

The sound of his voice died away as Daddisman, Elbert, and the Captain tramped downstairs, utterly serious.

An hour later when all was quiet the two old men still sat in the office discussing the arrival of Jim Bone. It appeared by his air of duello dignity that the Captain had something on his mind. They went over to the table and examined the ancient blood stains in it. Next they stood at the door which entered the hall, hesitating.

"You go," said White. "I'm afraid I might sthumble and disthurb him. I ain't stheady on my pegs to-night."

The Captain straightened up, threw his shoulders back, smoothed his outer front with his two thin hands, assumed his bugle charge expression, and

her eyes, and crept between the sheets of her snowy bed, what she desired above everything in the world was to become an author — one of those brilliant men and women who come trailing their amazing clouds of glory into fiction every year, tarry just long enough to “make a name,” and then disappear.

It was also on this same night, or, rather, about two o'clock in the morning, that Miss Mary Yancey sat up in bed and listened. Miss Agnes Yancey also sat up in her bed in the next room and listened.

“Sister Mary,” she called softly, “did you hear that?”

“Yes; what was it?”

“Sounded like a man creeping upstairs!” moaned Agnes.

“I knew it would happen,” quavered Mary, “when I saw that awful creature leaning over the gate this afternoon. We must get up and see what it is.”

She leaped from the bed and struck a match and lighted the candle upon the dresser.

“But if it is a man, why should we get up and go to meet him?” chattered Agnes, who was getting the chill of terror.

The next moment, however, they appeared in the hall and passed solemnly in review before the portraits of their ancestors which hung upon either side. Both were ghostly pale and wore absurdly ruffled gowns. Their hair was rolled upon hairpins, the points of which stuck out, and their bare feet looked funny and old, as if they had ceased to arch themselves.

Miss Mary advanced, carrying the candle in one hand and the garden shears in the other. Agnes clung to her, peering into every corner and closet, behind every door, under every bed. Suddenly they heard it again, the stealthy movements of something living, which seemed to be approaching them from the kitchen stairs.

“Oh, my hair!” gasped Agnes, throwing up her hands to cover her head as she sank down upon the landing.

The next moment a large gray cat padded up the remaining steps, tail erect, purring, and prepared to rub himself against anybody’s legs that were available.

“Scat!” screamed Miss Mary before she thought. The candle went bumping down the stairs. She had never spoken harshly to Thomas à Kempis before in his life. She snatched him from the floor before he could recover from his astonishment, strided to the back door, unlocked it, dropped him outside in the soft summer rain, slammed the door, then slowly climbed the stairs to her room. She could hear Agnes’s staccato sobs in hers. Both sisters were disappointed, although they were far from suspecting such a thing. Nothing is more ludicrous, if you want to look at it that way, than the longing of maidens for lovers which changes later to an old maid’s fear of a man hidden in the house. Really it is pathetic. And men should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law for allowing any good woman to remain unwed till this romantic neurasthenia develops.

Far out beyond the town a mocking bird was singing in his sleep, high up in an old elm tree before an ancient house; and inside a woman slept with the windows open wide, secure, locked within that serene assurance of her own beauty and power. Beautiful women never are afraid of men, never look for robbers under their beds.

CHAPTER IV

RUCKERSVILLE was a literary centre. Most of its inhabitants over the age of sixteen were orphaned authors — that is to say, authors without publishers. It was a place where adolescence flowered naturally into little hexameters of love, and old age faded into long historical narratives. The South is the only section of the country which still produces this kind of serenely uncommerical genius. In other places when an author cannot sell what he writes he wrings the neck of his muse and hires himself to a business concern. But here, he simply despises the “damned” publishers for a fool and goes on writing his masterpieces. In 1845 a certain old cock-poet published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* a poem of fifty thousand words, under the title of “Grouped Thoughts and Scattered Fancies.” It was concluded only at his death. Had he lived, it would undoubtedly have been fifty thousand words longer. He enjoyed that pleasant lyrical inebriation of the faculties so common to Southerners. I am venturing to copy here the forty-second sonnet of this remarkable production, which the skeptical reader may see for

himself any day he takes the trouble to visit Ruckersville in search of it.

*I saw it in my dream. O could I task
 My sense again to slumber, nor to awake
 So long as the dear vision was in sight!
 I will not do it so much wrong to make
 My rude words show the picture thou dost ask.
 Behold it in my passion! A delight
 Trembles through all my utterance! O I feel
 In the devoted beatings of my heart,
 That I should look enjoyment, nor appeal
 To vain resources of language to impart
 This vision of most rare happiness —
 That rapture it would madden to reveal,
 Which song itself would render spiritless,
 It was such sweet, such sad heart-touching tenderness!*

There still remained undimmed much of this divine fire in the hearts of his descendants. And the fact that not a line of prose or poetry had appeared in print since the publication of "Grouped Thoughts and Scattered Fancies" was due to the decadence in the literary taste of editors, rather than to any lack of merit in Ruckersville sonnets. At the time this story begins there were not less than five hundred finished and voluminous manuscripts in the attic archives of the town, by which not a single author had been discouraged. Captain Rucker-Martin, in fact, was engaged upon his fourth unpublished volume with as much ardour as if it were his first effort. This was a narrative of the Civil War and was entitled "Around the Camp Fires." Elbert White was

writing a history of "Marches in Virginia," to say nothing of others, some account of whose literary activities shall be found in these pages. And, when you come to think of it, after the cloud of dust we raise hurrying along in our times is settled into the sods that shall cover us at last, this unpublished literature of the South will be found to contain more material suited to the exalted glory of man than the history of commercial enterprise in the North and East, where the stolen dollars often account for the last ten stories of the sky-scraper. It was the kind of literature suited to monuments and tablets and to the shining head-boards of maidens' graves. Keats might have copied some of it beneath the immortal love scene upon his Grecian urn. Isaiah would have despised it, but Shakespeare would have giggled over it and culled some of it for Ophelia, it was all so naively the pastoral of the spirit rather than the literature of life.

Thus you understand that the atmosphere of Ruckersville was naturally literary. It is for the purpose of getting you properly acclimated in it that I am forced to go more into particulars. If this were a novel, the next thousand words might be omitted. There is so little "action" in them. But this is a little history of life, and life is made up of digressions. The story of our insides is always much longer than the story of our outsides. The biography of humans is made up more of what they plan to do than of what they really achieve, if it is set down literally. You

work hard with a certain aim in view. You purpose to "arrive" with your collateral all properly arranged for the event. It is clear sailing. Then Fate takes the gripes and inadvertently kicks you under the fifth rib; and there you are, set back about ten years. Your grandmother died without leaving you the inheritance you had every reason to expect. You have to get up and make your own fortune. Or, the ballots are counted, and you are not elected. You have to run again. God sees to it that you do not butt the stars every time you fetch a surge. It is a providential precaution against your destruction of the solar system. In a small way, the same things are true when it comes to telling a story. Unless you are writing mere fiction, you do not kick the climax goal in every chapter. You cannot keep the hero in sight all the time, going at full speed through the narrative with his tail over the dashboard and the grand stand yelling at every jump. This is done only in a novel. In a transcript from life nobody recognizes the hero, and words take the place of unconscious observation. For example, if you lived in Ruckersville you would have known all about the "Woman's Club." As it is, I must interrupt this narrative to explain, or you will not be in position to appreciate what follows and what does not follow.

It was composed of the most enlightened and progressive women in the place. They were ambitious. They conducted two or three little world-movements on the sly, of which the world never heard. They

irritated the town council, struggled to "rise in the scale of things," and were determined to produce something that was not in the nature of cakes, pickles, and infants. They studied parliamentary law and tried to practise it. They desired to "appear" in the magazines, and, by way of being strictly modern, they showed a diabolical energy in meddling futilely with the men's affairs, such as "petitioning" for this, that, and the other, and for caterwauling, year in and year out, about the one open saloon in Ruckersville. It was useless to explain to them that one open saloon was less damaging to masculine morality than a dozen blind tigers.

"But why have the blind tigers either?" demanded Miss Mary Yancey, who was merely femininely logical. She was the spokesman of the last committee from the club that waited on Colonel Lark, the mayor of Ruckersville.

"I do not know why, Miss Mary," answered the Colonel, wagging his old white head whimsically and blinking his little bead blue eyes at her.

"If you don't give a man a chance to flop back into the savage now and then in the open, he'll do it anyhow behind the do'. Maybe it's the way he's made, maybe it's the way he grows. Adam knew he was doin' wrong when he eat that apple, but all the angels in heaven couldn't have kept him from tastin' it. And I reckon it's all for the best. We never would have amounted to anything if he'd kept on settin' around the garden behavin' himself. Don't you

bother your dear heads about us men. We ain't really worth it. We are cut out of imperfections, just as you are fitted together out of perfections."

He was seated at his desk at his office in the Town Hall, his half-smoked cigar politely discarded in the presence of ladies, his fat, fiery-red wattles lay upon his wilted collar, and his short legs were crossed below his exceeding stomach. Miss Mary Yancey occupied the edge of her chair in an importunate attitude immediately in front of him, her tall, thin knees pressed closely together, her body bent forward. In one hand she held a petition signed by every member of the "Woman's Club"; with the other hand she purred the Colonel with gentle gestures in mid-air as she went on with her exhortation. Behind her, like the faint reserves of virtue and honour, sat Miss Leonora Bell and Miss Mildred Percey. They were looking their best for the good of the cause they represented. Women know that more than half of the success of it depends upon the way they look if they have to deal with men. As a matter of fact, the Colonel was a widower. And, while they were very far from suspecting such a thing, this was really the only way they had of courting him. But he understood it perfectly and was accustomed to wonder after each committee visitation which one would get him. Men pass through three stages matrimonially. The first is when they fall in love, but struggle against the banns. The second is when they are caught and married. The third is when they reach an age so advanced that

they do not fall in love at all, but are willing to marry anybody. The Colonel had arrived at this "Barkis is willin'" stage, but he was too shrewd to show his hand to three women at once. Personally, he had no preference — that is, he preferred either of them, and he more than half suspected all three of considering him. This was not his egotism, it was his nature. One thing a woman never dreams is that a man often knows that she is in love with him before she does. The trouble he has is in convincing her, inducing her to read her own heart to him properly. And he is usually very delicate about it, concealing his purpose beneath the adoring animation of his own love making. Colonel Lark was not the man to put all this esoteric loveliness of woman into words, but he enjoyed the committee from the "Woman's Club," and merely bided his time when it should become bold and brave enough to come in the abridged form of one person. Then he purposed to end the whole question of Ruckersville reformation by proposing marriage to the lady this happened to be.

The "Woman's Club" always met with Mrs. Fanning-Rucker. She was the leading woman of the town. That is to say, she was the one who was most successful at keeping all the other women behind her, beneath her, and under her. She was the creator of all the ruthless social discrimination suffered by others. Every circle of society has such a person in it, usually a female, just as every county has a sheriff, chosen

and elected to office on condition that he is not opposed to capital punishment and will hang a man if there is one to be hanged. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker, then, was the social sheriff and the feminine lid of Ruckersville. Naturally, she was vicious. Such women always are, no matter how many "movements" they have that look charitable and progressive. She entertained herself with mischief occasionally. For example, in the spring it amused her to entice a swarm of Captain Rucker-Martin's bees into her hives. With this in view, she planted a bed of rare and peculiarly pungent variety of Sweet Williams near her own gums, which were arranged in a wide circle about an immense horse-apple tree. It seemed that when the perfume of the Sweet Williams mingled with the odour of the apple blossoms no young and hopeful bee could resist the combination, any more than the Captain himself could resist a certain julep at Bilfire's saloon. Thus every year, upon some fragrant April morning, it happened that there would be heard a tremendous zooting in her side yard. Immediately Mrs. Fanning-Rucker might be seen to thrust her preposterously ugly old head out of an upstairs window, where she could observe a blooming bough of her apple tree sagging, mildewed almost black with a swarm of Captain Martin's youngest and most enterprising bees. She would smile, draw her head in, and call downstairs to the black house-boy.

"Thomas, put some comb and honey in that new beegum and set it under the horse-apple tree!"

After that she drew her chair to the back window of her room, which overlooked the Captain's place, sat down, and waited.

About eleven o'clock an awful figure might be seen emerging from the side door of the Captain's residence. It had a pair of long thin legs, the trousers being wrapped and tied securely over the top of the shoes with white strings. The head and trunk were encased in an old hoop skirt that had been stretched up to its uttermost and covered with mosquito netting. The netting was drawn in at the bottom and tied in a gauzy, ruffled, shirrtail effect about the thin loins. The top was also gathered up and tied above the head of whatever was inside. About the distance of four hoops from the summit the arms of a man extended. In one mitten-covered hand he held an old-fashioned cowbell by the clapper, in the other he carried a bee-gum smeared inside and out with honey. He moved furtively over the lawn, crossed into that of Mrs. Fanning-Rucker and continued to advance even more furtively toward the white circle of gums, toward the apple-tree bough laden with his bees. At the same time the woman in the upstairs bedroom moved her chair back to the window overlooking the spot.

The Captain (for the hoop skirt concealed no other) set down his gum and began a rhythmic circle around the hissing, tightly clustered bees, clapping his bell furiously. The very air rocked and clamoured with the fearful din, but not a bee budged. This might continue perhaps ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, and


was designed to fascinate the insects and stupefy them so that they could be raked into his gum and carried back home. But it seems that a bee may sometimes dream he is mad and do quite as much damage as when he is awake. This is what invariably happened. The moment the Captain lifted his hand to rake the swarm off into his hive some little demon with a nightmare found a weak place in his armour, darted through it, and occupied the hoop skirt with him. Then ensued a scene of wild confusion. The swarm changed into a whirlwind about the hoop skirt, which became vocal, the legs of it leaped wildly and bore it at lightning speed across the two lawns which separated the Captain from his home and the soothing applications of antiphlogistine to his swollen places. During this spirited dénouement Mrs. Fanning-Rucker sat in her chair rocking to and fro and laughing till the tears ran down her long, sallow, horse-shaped face. When all was quiet an hour later and the immigrant bees were properly pacified among the apple blossoms she would again call down the stairs.

“Thomas, go and get that beegum the Captain dropped on the lawn and put it in the cellar. We shall need it next year.”

This was the kind of woman she was, with a humorous taste for cruelty. If she had been a man she would have been called “an old rascal.” As it was, she enjoyed the fear and flattery of her inferior kind. She never visited in Ruckersville, but if a neighbour was ill she sent jelly or wine or flowers to the afflicted

one. This was her way of expressing her ladyshipness.

She was also the patroness of Art. Not that she knew much about any art, but you will have observed that in its infancy everywhere art is insulted by the encouragement and protection of fools. This was how she became the tutelary deity and president of the "Woman's Club." It was the centre of artistic activities as well as of such economic and reformatory interests as I have already described. Nearly every member of it was engaged in some literary adventure. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's office was to encourage every one of the adventuresses to believe that she could write an immortal sonnet or story. This was a characteristic she had in common with teachers of English composition in girls' schools and with that class of editors who reject manuscripts with so much flattery that the poor victims go on writing more of them.



CHAPTER V

ON THIS memorable afternoon of the fourteenth of June there was the usual semi-circle of women in Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's elegant parlour. Miss Leonora Bell was about to call the roll when the Misses Yancey entered. They were late, having been detained by the necessity of locking up the house, to protect it from a disreputable looking person who had loitered openly about their front gate and had been seen deliberately staring up at their innocent Juliet window galleries. They felt as indignant about this as if the scamp had been detected in the act of peeping at their ankles. They moved quietly to the two nearest chairs, one behind the other. Both were very tall. Their clothes murmured starchily. Each had the freshly laundered appearance so many women achieve. They wore stiff white skirts, and white shirt waists that showed their collar bones through garlands of hand-embroidered eyelets.

All this time Miss Bell stood, roll book in hand, with that polite patience which is so embarrassing to those who inadvertently give occasion for its exercise. She began:

“Mrs. Elizabeth Fanning-Rucker.”

“Present.”

“Mrs. Patricia Felton.”

“Present,” answered a pale young woman, with black hair, staccato eyes of the same colour, and reed-flute mouth.

“Mrs. Clarinda Magnis.”

“Present,” answered a large blond woman whose voice seemed to disturb her. She moved all over, rearranged her skirts, and flashed an indignant look around the room as if she felt conscious of having made some kind of “break.” She was a new member, and nearly frightened out of her wits by the honour.

“Mrs. Frances Luster.”

Miss Bell blushed and passed immediately to the next name. Mrs. Luster had given birth to an infant the night before and could not be present.

“Miss Mildred Percey.”

“Present.”

“Miss Mary Yancey.”

“Present.”

“Miss Agnes Yancey.”

“Present.”

Miss Bell closed the roll book, lifted her eyes, smiled, and pronounced with the intonation of a teacher who is calling the name of her favourite pupil:

“Mrs. Elbert White.”

“Present,” droned a deep, somnambulant voice.

Every face in the room turned instinctively in the direction from which the sound came.

Seated in one of Mrs. Fanning-Rucker’s most expensive rosewood chairs was a very tall old woman.

She was in the darkest corner of the room, and the most conspicuous figure in it. You could not have told why. Greatness in a human sometimes gets mixed with the grotesque in situation. This may have accounted for her prominence. She was "out of drawing" with the little occasion. She looked the grandmother of the stars, in a flowered petticoat. Her thin white hair was parted and drawn back from a brow as smooth as a tombstone, and which, in spite of this smoothness, somehow gave the impression of having a beautiful verse of poetry inscribed upon it, setting forth the sweet virtue of the dead. She was blind, and had the ineffable look of the blind who have nothing to do, no worried unrest about duties unfulfilled, merely the serene patience of those who sit and wait. She wore a kind of smile like those who have been deprived of their sorrows and retain that angelic roundness of features which belongs to youth. One inferred that if she should live to be a hundred she would be amazingly beautiful. For more than twenty years cataracts had veiled the pupils of both eyes, and she had the habit of keeping the lids closed. This gave her the appearance in company of smiling and talking in her sleep. She wore an old calico gown with pink and blue morning glories in it. They were connected by a curved stem to a vine which ran as straight as a bean pole from hem to neck, and the vine was one of those Burbank commercial wonders often seen in cheap prints, in that it was able to produce alternately pink and blue blossoms of enormous

size and brilliance. She was queer about this with the artless queerness of the blind. She loved colour and always wore gayly hued frocks.

She did not really belong to the "Woman's Club," never having done anything or written anything. But she was always present at the meetings and at every other social function in Ruckersville. She was the most silent, the most cultured, the most entertained, and the most beloved woman in the town. Nobody could have told what she was good for, yet no one knew how to spare her. If she did not enjoy her blindness, she enjoyed the benefits of it. And it extended as far as her affections. She bestowed these alike upon the deserving and the undeserving. She was that human least common denominator in society who fitted silently, sweetly, into every fraction of it.

If any one in Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's parlour could have dreamed that the old blind saint was unconsciously taking notes upon them, rather than upon their committees and programmes and literature, they would have been horrified. But you cannot suspect the person of eavesdropping you who sits openly in your very presence. It is a psychic phenomenon common enough, but not understood.

The secretary read the minutes, from which one gathered that the preceding meeting had been an important one. A paper had been read upon the pearl fisheries of the coast of the Samoan Islands, from which it appeared that oysters were very cruelly treated in that place. Another set forth conditions in Cuba,

a subject of timely interest on account of the supervision of the United States. The thing which seemed to produce the deepest impression was the fact that moonlight was so bright in Cuba that it gave mules insomnia and caused them to die of nervous prostration. This sensitiveness of the mule excited much discussion, and the reason why you will readily understand if you have observed the recently awakened mind of woman. To think is a new and delightful experience. Therefore, they are not particular to grasp the important point in a discussion. They perform the most delightful mental gymnastics upon any little reed of an idea. The delicious sensation of exercising the brain is what they are after. They see themselves in the fresh role of intellectuality. They have made the immense stride from personal gossip to the consideration of an idea. If the idea they choose is the least one suggested by the subject under consideration, it is amusing, but natural. A child is not equal to calculus. Thus, when the topic of Cuba was under consideration in the Ruckersville "Woman's Club," interest centred, not upon the resources, social and political conditions of that little mulatto country, but upon the very queer circumstance that mules suffered there from moonlight insomnia. They cared nothing for the unsightly animal, but their humanitarian instinct, always highly developed, directed them to puzzle over the peculiar invalidism of the unfortunate beast in Cuba, just as they failed to compute the value of pearls in

the discussion of the pearl fisheries, and devoted themselves to the frightful slaughter of innocent oysters. Every one must observe that the contribution of the modern woman to thought is almost entirely directed by her maternal instinct translated into a kind of sentimental humanitarianism. They are not practically intelligent, but merely mercifully excited mentally. And this is really fortunate, for the civilized male mind is scientific and commercial and has resulted in some sad oversight of the need of human nature, to say nothing of mules and oysters.

Next followed a memoranda of certain business details and the names of the committee appointed to draw up resolutions against spitting on the streets and to present it to Mayor Lark.

"Delightful refreshments were served by the charming hostess, which were enjoyed by all," concluded Miss Yancey, folding her notes and gently lowering herself into her chair.

"Are the minutes correct?" demanded Mrs. Fanning-Rucker.

Apparently they were.

"Is the committee on spitting ready to report?"

Miss Yancey again rose to her feet.

"Madam President, we have found some difficulty in framing the resolutions. It is a delicate subject, and we ask for extension of time."

A close observer might have seen the incandescent flash of humour in the blind woman's face as Miss Yancey resumed her seat.

"Is there any news from editors and publishers?"

This question produced that state so often observed at a religious experience meeting when all are invited to talk. Every woman present assumed a self-conscious expression and remained silent. Then, as in the experience meeting the old bell-wether saint leads the way with the same old story of his divine relationship, Miss Mary Yancey opened her reticule and drew forth what appeared to be a wedding invitation. She took a thick, handsome sheet of linen paper from the envelope and read aloud:

"DEAR MISS YANCEY:

We are returning herewith your story. This does not mean that it may not be available for some other magazine, but we are overstocked at present with unpublished manuscripts and do not think it advisable to keep you waiting so long to see your story in print, as we should have to do if we accepted it. We shall be glad, however, to have you submit others from time to time.

"Faithfully yours,

"EDWIN U. U. BACHK."

There was a murmur of praise from mouth to mouth.

"That is encouraging, Mary," said Mrs. Fanning-Rucker. "What did you do?"

"I sent the story back to him," blithely explained Miss Yancey, "and told him I was willing to wait ever so long for its publication."

"You'll never see it in print," snapped Mrs. Felton. "I have no less than five letters from that editor, exact copies of the one you read. He is a fiend. He plays you like a trout he has on a line, but he'll never

publish anything you write unless it is a design for making a corset cover or an original pattern for wide-legged marguerites!"

Mrs. Patricia Felton had a sort of brier-patch mind from which little cotton-tailed ideas leaped out and got away. If she could ever have caught one and set it down alive and kicking, she might have succeeded. The trouble was she destroyed them with her grape-shot vocabulary, and mailed the remains to some leading magazine. Your amateur author will not consider any other kind of periodical.

Miss Yancey looked indignant, as much as to say she pitied any one who could be guilty of dashing cold water upon the helpless, upturned face of genius.

"Which story did you send, Mary?" inquired Mildred, tenderly. She was a woman whose spirit was composed of the most healing salve. And she knew Mary's stories almost by heart, the two had laboured over them together so often.

"It is a new one," the author admitted blushing.

"Read it, Mary," exclaimed the "Woman's Club."

"But I told you I sent it back to the editor."

"You must have a copy."

She did. Slowly, gently, as if it were a living thing, the manuscript was drawn from her reticule.

There are more authors alive out of print than ever do get into it. And every one of them takes this kind of consolation for their failures. They read

their things aloud to their friends. They form clubs among themselves, the bravest, the most long-suffering institutions in this country, for that purpose. And this kind of club survives, held together by a common misery, until some member actually does get into print. Then she becomes indifferent, disloyal to the others. The illusion is broken and the organization dies.

“The title,” read Miss Yancey, “is ‘The Uses of Adversity’.” She cleared her throat and began:

“Fair, yes, more than fair was Nina Hamilton, and there was more than beauty in her bright, flower-like face. The daughter of a wealthy aristocratic Southerner, she inherited the warm impulsive feelings of our Southern land, while from her mother she derived the almost ethereal beauty of form and features and the clear marble complexion belonging to Northern climes. With her small, well-rounded figure she united grace and ease seldom to be met with, and her face —’twas one of Nature’s masterpieces. Her features were delicately moulded and of Grecian regularity. The bright blue eye, so speaking in its glances, when once seen was not soon forgotten, and the smile was one of those whose influence all must feel. In her the picture of Zuleika seemed realized, and as you gazed you thought,

“The light of love, the purity of grace,
The mind, the music breathing from her face,
The heart whose softness harmonized the whole;
And oh! that smile was itself a soul!”

One receives from this opening paragraph a veracious impression of literary ideals in Ruckersville. No ending could be good enough for such a beginning. And of course one can say that the thing was absurd.

As a story, yes. All the literature of the South, as literature, borders upon absurdity. But as an expression of innocuous innocent-mindedness, nothing in the scriptures surpasses it. It is always as sexless as a hymn, whether written by an old maid or a drunken old man. Love is a lavender-sweet, poetry-headed experience, not the decadent poisoned passion displayed disgracefully naked in modern fiction. I do not defend Miss Yancey's story, you understand, but I merely contend that worse things appear in the best magazines.

The reader will not be asked to attend another meeting of the "Woman's Club." You have seen the vitals of the female mind, a queer pair of wings with no body.

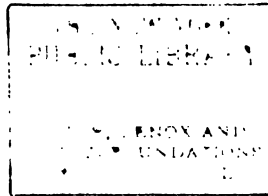
The sun was gone. Nature had become the perfumed kissing lover that Nature always is in the summer twilight. Dusk was falling, or, rather, it appeared to be rising from the earth, a soft shade, sod-brown, changing into the darkening green of overhanging trees. Very far off the stars were faintly singing, and under the doorstep, beneath the stones, in the long tangled grass, the crickets were strumming away to answer them, a sort of clod chorus, strident, thin, but in perfect tune. A cricket never strikes a false note. And this is really the purpose for which they were created. You must have observed that no human ever heard the stars sing. But the moment the first one puts on her evening shine and trails out upon the fading foot-lighted sky line, the early evening

CHAPTER VI

FIVE minutes after the whirlwind had passed, leaving the gnats among the morning glories in Amy's lap with their infinitesimal heels kicked up and their wings flattened out, a man might have been seen coming slowly along the same street. He was old and fat, not very tall. He wore trousers too long in the stride, which caused the bottom of each leg of them to hitch up and then drop down again as he stepped along. He was in his shirt sleeves and carried a thin black alpaca coat folded over one arm. A very much worn and narrow-brimmed straw hat was tilted moodily over his face. And what could be seen of this was mournful. His underlip was thick and pendulent, his chin frosted with a gray stubble and overhung with a drooping, tobacco-stained moustache that would otherwise have been white. A pink bald spot about the shape and size of half a small saucer showed between the brim of his hat behind and the thin untrimmed gray hair which fringed the lower part of his head. He was "wingfooted," and his legs rubbed so close together as he walked that, as Maclaren puts it, one knee seemed to say to the other, "If you will let me by this time, I'll let you by next time!" The remarkable thing about his figure was that it lacked so many



“HE PAUSED BEFORE THE OLD HOUSE AND STOOD FOR A MOMENT STUDYING THE SERENE FACE OF AMY, HIS WIFE”



of the angles of the human frame. His shoulders drooped, his neck was so short and fat that his head came literally next to his trunk. His legs in repose might have appeared as one. His arms were mere antennæ, futile, listless. One had the feeling that if he had not been a man he would have been a worm; that in case he had a soul it must be a cocoon with the chrysalis of a dead butterfly inside, and that, being a man, he must have lost his guardian angel long ago in battle for him. Nothing more forlorn, or hopeless, in the very nature of things, could be imagined than this man, who followed slowly in the wake of the little whirlwind.

He also paused before the old house and stood for a moment studying the serene face of Amy, his wife, in the darkening frame of the window. Now for the first time you understood that he was drunk; not very drunk—merely sadly, hopelessly so. This was revealed by his little furtive preparations. He put on his coat, made an abortive attempt to lift himself and square his shoulders. He took off his hat entirely, like a feeble, senile gallant getting ready to flourish a bow to the ladies. He was a poor old actor changing his costume for the next scene. The neighbourhood was his dressing-room, the open street was the place where he “made up” for another rôle in the little drama of life.

And he never lost interest in this “last act.” The risk that quickened every sodden faculty more than the most enthusiastic audience can animate and in-

spire a favourite actor was this: whether for two hours he, the village vagabond and drunkard, could fill the rôle of hero in a blind woman's fancy without once missing his cue or forgetting his "lines."

"Elbert," said Amy a moment later, "I have had such a pleasant day."

"I know it, Amy. For the rest of us a day doesn't care whether it's pleasant or not, but whenever the Maker of light creates a poor little runt of a day He encourages it by giving it permission to spend the whole of itself with you. Then the darned little thing brushes its teeth, combs its sunrise, perfumes its air with ten thousand flowers, clears its skies, and comes and shines like a lover outside your window from dawn to dusk!"

Amy laughed. Fortunately she could not see her husband. He sat humped in his chair, his head poked forward terrapin fashion, his prominent, blood-shotten blue eyes walled up, his knees braced one against the other. He was really only the prompter behind the scene to the eloquent gentleman who complimented God with the authorship of a runty day in a certain woman's honour. Amy's laugh, like her features, was wonderful, and for the same reason; neither sorrow nor anxiety had added those flat notes so often heard in woman's ha-ha's. It came deep, mezzo-toned, golden, from the Arcady of her blindness. To preserve it Elbert would have suffered himself to be quartered, but he could not have remained sober even for a day.

"But this has been an unusually happy day,"

she went on. "I have an idea. I have been to the 'Woman's Club,' and I have brought home with me an idea."

"I do not doubt it," retorted Elbert. "I never go out of this house in the morning looking for an idea, I never spend the day down town trying to swap history and tradition for one, that I do not come in the evening to find you sitting here with the 'Holy Grail' in your hands drinking poetry out of it."

"But I am troubled about this one. I'm afraid it's blasphemous."

"I hope so. If I were going to find fault with you, Amy, it would be for that. You have always seemed to me fatally lacking in this natural ingredient of the human — blasphemy — that egotism of man which sasses the Creator."

Elbert never said a good thing nor a bright one anywhere but in the presence of his wife. Her blindness was her faith, and, therefore, his inspiration. I do not recommend it, but I say that if more wives had cataracts over their eyes, more husbands would become great. And it is not my fault that the moral inanition of Elbert White does not prove this conviction. The fact remains that the way so many wives get their eyes "opened" about the men they marry, and keep them coldly observant, often prevents these poor Saturn souls from collecting and congealing their rings of immortality more creditably.

Amy had laid aside her work, a purse she was handling. It glistened now in the moonlight and

other beads like a little sample put together of the many coloured foundation stones of the New Jerusalem. Finished, it would have been the very pocket for a young angel's Christmas present, but, carried by any woman yet in the flesh and gowned in a cheap print, it was destined to become one of those ornamental absurdities which none of them know how to resist. She sat with the palms and fingers of her hands folded together and held closely under her chin. This was one of her favourite attitudes, contracted through the character of her thinking. And now it gave her the appearance of a holy figure in a stained glass window. The closed eyelids prevented any animation of her features and heightened this effect. No one would have supposed what was really a fact, that she was a saint in whom the human predominated like a rosy light in a tomb, that she had a brilliant mortal intelligence, and a sense of humour which she must have inherited from that wink in God's eye, somewhere mentioned in the Old Testament, it was so divinely illuminating, so omnisciently astute, so smilingly patient. All of which her natural sight might have obstructed if she had retained it. There is nothing so blinding to the average person as his eyes. They furnish the short-sighted angle of vision by which his thoughts are measured.

"You know," she began, in her deep, recitative monotone of the blind, "the Recording Angel is the only biographer in heaven of whom we have any information, and this is very meagre."

"Naturally," interpolated Elbert. He took occasion of the rest between his "lines" to insert his thumb and forefinger into his waistband pocket, from which he drew two little red "breath" pills and a clove, which he slipped between his lips.

"If we knew more about its character we should know better what to expect from the Book of Life," Amy went on. "But, aside from the description written by Isaiah of an almost superfluous number of wings, little is known about any angel in heaven. This, Elbert, I believe, has given rise to more mortal anxiety in the world than the nature of God, whose greatness and goodness and immense devotion to man may be so easily inferred from the stars and from the change of seasons and from the unimpeachable loveliness of all little children."

By way of protecting himself from the doings of this very Angel, Elbert had long since become an atheist. A God who employed a foreign-to-man bookkeeper was not to his taste. Therefore, he was not interested in Amy's excellently expressed opinion of him. Still he listened patiently, sucking his clove and wondering when he would be permitted to escape into the kitchen and prepare supper. He had an engagement to meet Captain Martin and Clark Story at Bilfire's saloon to look at Story's specimens.

"It's a terrible thing, Elbert," she continued with sweet emotion, "for a human without wings to have his peripatetic, penguin character added up and subtracted from perfection by an unimaginable be-

ing who may be innocent of having any character at all, but who may possess an argus-eyed faculty for noting and tabulating all our temptations and transgressions."

"It certainly is," he agreed amiably, having as yet no suspicion of where she was leading him.

"If it could be proved that he, the Awful Angel, had ever smoked as much as a mild cigar, for example, or tasted a julep, or kissed somebody, or sworn at the carelessly flirted tail of a comet across the pages of his memoranda, we should feel safer than we do about the personal outcome of the Day of Judgment, shouldn't we?" She was smiling whimsically, a smile that missed him because of her blindness and was directed toward an old moon-faced clock that stood in one of the dark corners of the room.

"One has a mournful premonition that such a completely expurgated chronicler is apt to be severe in his debit column of deeds done in the body. One would infinitely prefer to appear naked and properly ashamed as God sees us rather than as we may have been observed by a pluperfect Angel with a frown beneath his forehead wings and a stout quill behind his ear."

Instead of wings, Amy had sturdy, sybil legs to her mind. Elbert was accustomed to listen to these unconscious criticisms of the scriptures. The queer thing about her was not her blindness, but the destructive clarity with which she discerned the impossible in the infallible, and yet retained her sublime faith

in as much of it as she could incorporate in her ideal of Elbert.

"Well, what's to be done about it?" he demanded, humouring her.

"That's it. That is the idea I have come upon. I am thinking of writing a little Book of Life myself, not of competing, you understand, with *Him*, the original multifarious biographer, but just a meagre one of the men and women in this town that I know. It would be in the nature of supplementary footnotes on the humans we are in spite of divine grace. And they might help to soften the angelic exaggerations of our faults and frailties. And they would count, for the Angel would be obliged to set them down as one of my deeds done in the body."

Elbert said nothing. He was stirring, however, and getting upon his elbow mentally to stare at Amy. He felt a vague alarm. She went on serenely unconscious.

"This town is full of fiction that never gets published. Rachel tells me the Captain has nearly finished his fourth romance of the Civil War. Mildred Percey has seventy-two original poems in her portfolio. And Leonora Bell has written a blistering paper on 'Man, the Orang-Outang,' which has been refused by eight editors. I have been wondering if there is not beginning to be a demand for just the truth. Suppose some one wrote about the men and women in Ruckersville as they are, and put in all the mitigating circumstances which the old Angel leaves out. I

was thinking I might do a little of this, not to be published now, you know, but to go along with the Captain's romances and Mildred's poetry. Long after we are dead posterity might be as much interested in facts about us as it is in the fiction we have written and laid away. Maybe it would read like the best fiction then. All I should ask of you, dear, would be to copy my notes in the evening when you come home."

Elbert was aghast. He feared the awakening of Amy's Recording Angel more than he did that of any other angels. Her tentative proposition had the effect of turning off the light on his stage and of leaving him in the dark. From being the star performer in a blind woman's fancy, he perceived that he was about to become the amanuensis for an occult intelligence, and probably be called upon to write out a memoranda of his own feelings. He never could tell how much his wife knew about him. No husband can, even when he has her open eyes in which to measure himself. But her blindness rendered her inscrutable. He could only anticipate his fate by the astuteness with which she often understood and interpreted others.

"I'd be particular who I laid out in such a tale, Amy. You never can tell when the truth will tear the shirt off of a man nor when it will lame a woman for life. Who do you think of putting into the first chapter?"

"Well, to-day at the club Mary Yancey read one of her stories that the editor sent back. She called it 'The Uses of Adversity.' But she missed adversity about as far as a shooting star misses this planet.

The heroine was only the painted paper doll of her imagination. She could never have breathed the breath of life without sneezing. Yet Mary went on to tell in a brocaded silk style how, although she had been the spoiled darling of fortune, she behaved herself when poverty overtook her people, wore a simple white muslin, married a millionaire at last, and lived in extravagance ever afterward. Now, Elbert, adversity has been the only sweetheart poor Mary ever had. And what I'm saying is, if she'd just written out what a faithful lover he's been, instead of telling romantic lies on him, that would have been a good story. She can't get rid of him to marry anybody else. If she could have written out how it feels for a woman to miss happiness and get her little hopes from a fortune-teller instead of out of life, I reckon the editor would have taken it."

Amy drifted into silence. She was thinking of how many times Mary Yancey had confided in her about visits she made to camps of vagabond gypsies to have her fortune told. Being blind, she was the unconsciously appointed receiver of secrets in Ruckersville. Thus she knew that for years the angular old maid had lived a pathetically double existence, one as the grim and industrious mistress of the old Yancey house, where she and her sister kept an occasional boarder, and the other as the tall heroine of a fortune-told romance. As often as the expert with the gypsies was repeated she became really engaged to some other man. And

knew that not a day passed that the old bride-elect did not look for him, half expecting to meet him face to face. These patient anticipations were the real inspiration of her stories and accounted for the highly imaginative vein in which they were written. She was thinking that this double ellipsis of Mary's life must be computed in her own secret appendix to the great Angel's more formal record. She smiled, wondering at what price he quoted poor Mary's innocent imaginary betrothals.

Meanwhile Elbert had been relieved to know that some one else was engaging the energies of Amy's dangerously direct mind, and had fallen asleep. His whole body sagged to one side, his head lay upon the uptilting shoulder, and at this moment from his open mouth came a deep snore. Instantly he was awake, startled, cocked and primed with the denial he knew he would have to make.

"Elbert," said Amy, "you are asleep."

"I am awake and about to serve supper," he retorted, rising and shuffling toward the door which opened into another room.

"You will bring the note book when you return from the office to-night?" Her mind was still upon that.

"I will, Amy Light!" This was a term of endearment with which he often extolled her.

An hour later she lay dreaming in her bed, and Elbert was sitting in Bilfire's saloon with Captain Martin and Clark Story before a plain deal table upon which the latter had spread his specimens.

CHAPTER VII

THERE are bombs and bombs. Those, for example, cast honourably by a hostile army into a defenceless city, and the assassin variety aimed by anarchists at the stomachs of respectable people, "and many others," as children say in the geography class when they are naming the products of foreign countries. But the most thrilling of all is the human bomb that drops down into a somnambulant community with his fuse burning. Jim Bone produced this effect upon the peaceful coma of Ruckersville. During the next few weeks after his arrival there was a curious cleared space about him upon which no one intruded. That is to say, no one asked him how was his health, or what was his business, or how long he purposed to remain. But every one saw that his fuse was burning, and no one knew whether this meant that he would shoot the sheriff, or behave like the conventional prodigal and go up to be prayed for at the evening service in church, where the usual June revival was in progress. During the day he might be seen seated beneath the awning of Daddisman's Hotel, his chair tilted back against the wall, his long legs spread out impudently on the sidewalk, his body doubled till he sat on the small of his back, and his shirt laced up in

front with a blue shoestring. He was really a wounded man, suffering from the cupid fever. But no one knew this. The dog that had attached itself to him that first evening was literally the one creature who understood the situation. He lay always in front, hind legs folded forward, forepaws extended, and his red-brown hound's head resting upon them, while his adoring eyes never left the face of his friend except when some one passed. Then he arose, extended his tail, wagged it in expository fashion, as much as to say:

"This is Mr. Jim Bone, my new master. You may remember him: he left here some years ago. Nice fellow, feeds well, and no bad habits."

The trouble was, nobody believed the dog. One day, shortly after his arrival, Tony Adams, who had been sober long enough to shave and put on a clean shirt, hurried round the corner, came close to his chair, and murmured in that mysterious male undertone men have when they smell blood:

"Better git up and git, Jim. The sheriff's after you. Swore out a warrant for you early this morning."

"Say he did?"

His lethargy was the superlative expression of contempt for the sheriff. He went on whittling the stick upon which he was engaged.

Tony had become his adoring but distant satellite. He would have been a boon companion like the dog, but Mr. Bone treated him with the same reserve that he did the rest of the community. Tony had the feeling that his fate hung in the balance of that dark,

inscrutable face. He sometimes followed him into Bilfire's saloon, and bore with humility the insult of not being asked to drink with the hero. He received the impression that, not being quite a man, he was not yet entitled to the privilege of drinking with one. He felt like a fool on probation. And he resented nothing. But he desired above everything that Jim would ask a favour of him. He was merely standing afar off, publican fashion, fascinated, and waiting for this direful demigod in top boots to make up his mind as to what sacrifice and service he desired of him.

The life of the world in miniature flowed slowly, softly, through the streets of the town. And the peculiar features of it appeared to fascinate Bone. He was taking a census of the situation, he was being revived from the long past. He observed the young negro lads now in the rabbit-hunting period of their development and recalled far back the time when he was their whooping companion upon the red hills in the broom sedge. He recognized the faces of certain old tubby black mammies, and of lean old men, black and white. All drifted by like shadows that memory cast upon the golden background of his youth. No one spoke to him. He was the italics of a dark and bloody night to them, now twenty years old, but still remembered. Ruckersville was not in the habit of emptying its veins upon a card table. All difficulties were carried on in a vituperating vocabulary, or, in extreme cases, with bare fists. Georgians do not like to kill. They have a morality against the shedding of human

with a knife. And they were not inclined now to welcome the man who had left four scars varying from three to five inches in length upon the person of Tony Adams. Tony was nobody's pet; still, his veins were a sacred trust imparted to him by nature, which had been violated by this shanky prodigal. If he went up to be prayed for, good and well. If he did not, then he was not a proper prodigal, and they would have nothing to do with him. This was about the size of it.

Meanwhile, Jim made no advances. He had not determined in his own mind yet whether to continue the rôle of criminal, which had shadowed his past in Ruckersville and which had since made him the hero of more than one western tour, or to yield his scalp as a lover, or to become a prominent citizen, or simply to go away with his feathers singed. The whole situation had been complicated by Sylvia Story, the woman he had seen that first day upon the porch of the old house beyond the oat field. If Sylvia had been a star-faced maiden, the situation might have been simple. He could have managed to kiss her by this time, and, satisfied with that commonplace victory which men of his type rarely press further with star-faced maidens, he might have gone on about his business. The thing that troubled him was whether he could kiss Sylvia. She was the kind of woman who excites this sort of speculation in a man without gratifying his curiosity. He had seen her once on the street, and she made no modest pretence of not seeing him. Once he was sitting under the hotel awning when she

passed, stepping with that curious muscular grace common to some women and to jungle cats. She covered him some distance off with the dark mystery of her splendid eyes. It was the serene challenge of the woman who has the upper hand and knows it. He understood and resented the insinuation. No man knows how to court such a woman. His instinct is to catch her around the waist and walk off with her, without any preliminary romanticism. But this had never been done in Ruckersville. The only retort he could make now was to refuse to draw in the length of his legs, which sprawled too far out over the sidewalk. This made no difference to Sylvia; neither would she make the concession of space demanded by the legs. Seeing that she must either walk around or step over his feet, she gathered up her skirts, assumed the expression a woman has when she must straddle a slimy place in the road, and was about to step over the first one, when he capitulated and jerked both out of the way with a growl.

“Still,” the keen sting of a smile in the tail of Sylvia’s eye seemed to say as she went on, “you had to move them!”

When a woman makes a point like that, a man’s animal self-respect compels him to remain upon the scene until he wins. Love is not love either in men or women. It is the instinct to subjugate, an instinct of which Nature makes excellent use for the purpose of keeping the earth properly populated. Love is the cause for the unhappiness which love engenders.

breasts of its victims. There were evening hours every day when Mr. Bone felt like a particularly vicious steer that has had his horns sawed off. He was not himself. He was better than himself. He was forced by this ever renewing emotion to "freshen up," so to speak. That is another natural thing about love which looks queer. It has a grotesque way of rejuvenating a man in spite of his age and habits. This is why the old widower wears a tell-tale blossom in his buttonhole. He cannot help it. Nature is a series of nets prepared to catch us, to retain us awhile as we drift downward on our way back to dust. God is not nearly so particular as some preachers represent about the way He redeems a man. The gospel is much broader than the Acts of the Apostles. Every instinct is a candle buoy to life everlasting. The only way you get down at the end is because you retain the awful privilege of falling from grace — every grace, including that of love. This is really an expression of His respect for man. You have forever the right to fall. And this was what depressed our hero as he considered his present situation. He had been in love so often, had so many times experienced the transitory recreation of passion. He was one who took his salvation backward, and lost it every time he went forward. That is to say, the women he had loved were the women who had ended by tiring him the most. You could not trust them to last. He did not dream how equally true the reverse of this same experience was for the women in question.

In short, his plans had gone wrong. Fate had ignored them. He had somehow been deprived of cutting the figure he meant to cut when he decided to make this brief visit to the home of his youth. He was an indifferent ranchman who had made a fortune accidentally by staking a claim somewhere in Colorado during one of his sprees. He was returning from New York, where he had been to close the deal in which he sold his stake for an amazing sum. By a digression from the straight route back to New Mexico he could take in Ruckersville, merely as an eagle might visit an old discarded nest. Nothing had been further from his intention than to remain there longer than it would take to "paint the old town red." But from the moment he had set foot in it he had been in a trance, a trance which he knew was ridiculous, but which he could not make up his mind to break. The fact is, his mind had been dissolved, not only by Sylvia, but by the whole situation. One day a wagon loaded with shingles and drawn by a pair of black and white spotted oxen passed. The hubs of the wheels needed greasing and gave a groaning voice to the thing as it went by. The oxen held their heads close to the ground beneath the yoke, leaned away from each other, and crept along at a snail's pace. He restrained the impulse to run out and swing on to the pole which projected behind, as he had done when he was a boy. Really he was alarmed at this recrudescence of the youth he had been. Not being a psychologist, he did not understand how some accident of a long-forgotten sight, or

any little circumstance, might change the mental cylinders and cause the mind to act merely in terms of the past. He was obliged to go to Bilfire's saloon and take three drinks before he could recover his normal consciousness.

When he was not loafing in the saloon or beneath the awning of the hotel, he sometimes transferred himself to a seat upon a bag of seed potatoes in front of the store of Magnis, Luster & Company. He would there be flanked upon one side by a measure of rutabaga turnips and on the other by an open sack of dried peaches. He helped himself from each alternately, devouring both with equal relish. Turnips were the only fresh food he ate. At the hotel he persisted in demanding canned goods, mostly beef and tomatoes. This perversion of taste puzzled everybody in Ruckersville, for everybody had heard of it. He was the central topic of all the backbiting done in the town at this time.

"Eats like he'd been on an Arctic expedition," said Daddisman.

As a matter of fact, he had lived for years where the only food supplies were canned stuffs such as men, where they have no women to cook for them, resort to out of selfishness.

While he peeled his turnip and sliced it into his mouth, he stared at the monument raised in memory of the Confederate soldiers, which stood before him in the middle of the square, and which for some reason appeared to afford him amusement. The truth was,

the figure of the soldier on the pedestal was of extremely short stature. This was due to the fact that the "Daughters of the Confederacy," who had erected the monument, had not been able to afford the price demanded, and the skinflint sculptor shortened the legs of the hero to make up the difference. It was a sacred defect about which Ruckersville was so sensitive that it was never mentioned. No one doubts that as many men of low stature are brave as of tall stature, but the altitude of hero worship requires, if you raise a statue to the memory of a man, even if he is not over five feet in height, that the thing shall be at least ten to produce the proper effect. Jim Bone had seen the world, particularly the world of the West, where the sense of things is gigantic. And the realistic brevity of the legs of the Confederate hero tickled him. He discovered in it that element of the grotesque which is so characteristic of the South when it exalteth itself either in oratory or in any other form of exaggeration. The visible facts never warranted the proclamation. We are too pathetically poor in dollars and cents to evidence the greatness of our spirits.

One day as he sat contemplating the gallant pose of the duck-legged statue, with his mouth drawn back in a wedge-shaped smile, and his nose tilted at the usual offensive angle above it, a sharp tenor voice interrupted his reverie.

"Sir, do you mean anything derogatory to the glory of the Confederacy by that damned grin?"

Slowly the wedge-shaped grin was turned up and

fixed upon Captain Martin, who had placed himself directly, boldly, in front of the offence. It widened, increased, and it continued to mean the same thing, whatever that was.

“I say, sir, I demand satisfaction for your face! It’s insulting!”

He squared his poor old body, dashed at first one sleeve, then the other, to push them up, balled the skinny old hand into a fist, crooked the arm above, and grasped his bicep in the other hand with restrained emotion. His moustache bristled, his goatee worked furiously. His eyes danced with valorous frenzy.

Bone stood up, shook his loose trouser legs down, closed his clasp knife with a snap, turned his back upon the Captain, and remarked as he walked off:

“The legs of the durn thing’s too short. Glory ought always to be long in its stride.”

Every day he devoted the kissing hour of twilight to Sylvia Story. No one suspected this, least of all Sylvia, a circumstance for which he was devoutly thankful. For he was the sworn enemy of his passion and desired to escape before it should be discovered. Nevertheless, in the late afternoon he and the dog retired to his room in the hotel, where he made an elaborate toilet. That is to say, he scrubbed thoroughly, put on a clean shirt laced with a red shoestring, exchanged his corduroy trousers for a pair of gray checked ones (that showed his symptoms only by a green thread which ran through the checks), and brushed his boots. He was by his boots as a woman is by her

corset, he could not do without them. They were a part of his magnificent leg consciousness. And, no matter how hot the weather was, if he was in love, he wore boots, just as Mildred Percey would have tightened the waist laces of her corset. Love is probably the first evolution in the physical history of man and the inspiration of the first bath that Adam took. You will observe that the natural primitive boy never voluntarily bathes behind his ears or shaves the back of his neck until he reaches that age of adolescence when he actually "sees a girl." Then he begins to oil his wings and perfume himself. Later he leaves off the perfume and waxes his moustache.

The dog superintended these preparations with sympathy and every appearance of masculine intelligence. He applied the test of his nose to the checked trousers and found them satisfactory. He stood in front of the poor hobbled lover and wagged his tail in unison, while the afflicted one sat down, bent double, and secretly shined his boots as far up as they could be made to shine. When they were ready to start and the lover made sure that his hat was on sideways at the lady-killing angle, the dog leaped pleasantly upon his hind legs and did all he could to cheer him, for it was perfectly clear to his hound's sense of the situation that the victim resented the bondage of decking himself according to the demands of love.

The two then went out together. Mr. Bone put his hands in his pocket, smoked a cigar that sustained the same angle to his nose that a hen's tail does to her

back when she sings, and meant the same thing. He strolled through the town in this style, with Bimber trotting at his heels, his hind legs about two inches farther to the right than his fore legs, and his tail held delicately at half mast. They were observed from behind the primly starched curtains of old Mr. Percy's residence as they went by, also from behind the equally maidenly reserved curtains of the Misses Yancey's residence. But neither of them was conscious of this flattery. From sundown to dark they engaged in a leisurely, spectacular walk upon the hill and in the pasture about the old house on the edge of town where Sylvia Story lived with her father, Mr. Clark Story. That is to say, the dog pretended to hunt in order to give his master the decent cover of an occupation. The man merely strode moodily, grandly about after him, filled with indignation and disgust for himself and an unendurable longing to see Sylvia at one of the windows or out on the old hooded porch. This was denied him. She was the kind of woman a man must overtake. She would never face about and wait for him. Her experience proved that this was not necessary in her case.

CHAPTER VIII

BUT when the hour for revival services at the church arrived, the prodigal, accompanied by Tony Adams and the dog, was always to be seen seated three benches in the rear of the congregation. Tony wore the expression of a lost boy and occupied the darkest corner. The dog sat upon the floor and had to be kicked when certain hymns were sung to keep him from adding a howling refrain. Mr. Bone covered all the remaining space. His arms were stretched as far as they could reach along the back of the bench, his legs spraddled as usual in an ungainly manner. There was nothing offensive in his expression. It was merely enigmatical, and might have resembled Satan's if he had been permitted to attend choir practice in heaven.

Ruckersville was a church-going community. The sinners believed in God even more than the saints did. This is generally the case. As a rule, a saint gets to believe more and more in himself, but a sinner is deprived of this privilege and continues probably the dearest child of the Father in this world, being sadly conscious of his unworthiness. And it explains in terms of humanity the reasons why the publican's prayer is so much prized to this day in heaven. It is

the one proper prayer ever uttered by a mere man, and is set down in the scriptures as a pattern for that reason.

The trouble with Ruckersville was that about a generation before the present prodigal was born the saints had gotten the upper hand of the situation and had created a decimated public opinion which excluded all worldly amusements, golden ornaments, and many other things as natural for men and women to have as their hair and legs. The crop of sinners resulting from this arrangement was overwhelming. If you played cards, you were lost and might as well go the whole hog, gamble and have done with it. If you drank, you were also lost, and might as well get drunk for the same reason. If young, male or female (but more particularly the latter), and experiencing that pastoral frivolity of the leg muscles which can only be relieved by dancing, your feet took hold on hell. You showed the evidence of a fallen nature. Virtue had gone out of you. There was not a girl or a respectable woman in Ruckersville who had ever danced a minuet or waltzed with a man's arm about her waist. It appeared that there was something contagious about either the arm or the waist. The subject was so scandalous that no one ever explained which one had the contagion. This, of course, was not the case in the old Joseph Rucker julep days of romance and king's grant prosperity. But when your aristocrat becomes poor, and religious in his pride, he is one of the narrowest minded moral skinflints in creation. This

was why there were so many well-born, bony, unmarried, chaste, poor-spirited women in the town. It also explained in part why all the men drank, played cards for money, and went fox hunting in desperation. The poor creatures instinctively revolted against the lockstep of such inhuman respectability. Righteousness is a terrible thing when a conscientious fool enforces it. And if nine tenths of us did not backslide, the world would dwindle down to a few childless ascetics on each continent, and just the devil walking to and fro with all the natural instincts to tempt them back to life.

At the time of which I am writing there were but two persons in Ruckersville who had any inkling of this truth. One was Jim Bone, who was making a sort of heathen effort at comprehension as he sat behind the congregation and divided his attention between the wonderful head of Sylvia Story, who sat in the choir singing like a Corinthian vestal virgin, and the general forlornness in the faces of the elder men and women who appeared to have been saved by some kind of devastating grace.

The other person who really understood was Amy White, a blind pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night, who sat in her gorgeously flowered calico dress with some of the older women in the amen corner, dreaming her dreams and thinking up broader salvation scriptures for her little Book of Life, into which Elbert copied them from time to time. Being blind and good, she could not see to divide the sheep from

the goats. She had that sweet rain in her heart which falls alike upon the just and the unjust. She was forgiven by those who saw her lack of discrimination because of her limitations.

The preacher's eloquence had become fiery and concentrated since the appearance of Jim Bone in the congregation. He was a good man, who firmly believed that his Heavenly Father was a severe one. His religion was a sort of spiritual penitentiary of the soul, and nothing could exceed the ardour with which he sincerely laboured for the incarceration of other souls. As the prodigal sat night after night apparently unmoved, the mind of the whole congregation settled upon him. Amy felt the tension, but was unable to account for it.

One night in the midst of a poignant silence, following an invitation to sinners to come forward for prayers, she leaned over to Rachel Martin, the Captain's wife, her brow sweetly puzzled with fine wrinkles, and whispered:

"Rachel, what is the matter? There must be a terrible sinner present."

It was as if she had said:

"Rachel, there must be a skunk in the house. I smell him!"

"There is!" whispered Mrs. Martin. "It's that Jim Bone, settin' yonder on the back bench as if he enjoyed damnation, makin' of himself a stumblin'-block to this revival!"

"I remember him, years ago," returned Amy. "He wasn't a bad boy."

"No," snapped Mrs. Martin, "just bad enough to slit Tony Adams open in four places with his pocket knife the night before he left here. And from the looks of him he hasn't improved any out West, where he's been livin'."

She was righteously indignant. This is the severest form of indignation known to man, because it can be indulged to any extent conscientiously. And in Ruckersville Rachel Martin was the very fountain of it. She was in religious circles what Mrs. Fanning-Rucker was everywhere else, the moving spirit. She was a stout woman, whose hats refused to become her. Her features were too drastic to harmonize with anything so feminine as a turban or a lady's bonnet. She loved the Captain with all her heart, talked about her neighbours scandalously, read a leaflet at every meeting of the Woman's Missionary Society, and always prayed for "a closer walk with God." But she was not a hypocrite. She was only a spiritual ignoramus. She had the courage of her convictions, a dangerous form of valour in any kind of ignoramus. And she was now about to show it. She moved restlessly in her place beside Amy, like a setting hen ruffled and disturbed in her nest and that has a good mind to get up, get off of it, and go peck somebody. The awful absurdity of it was that she believed she was being "moved by the spirit." The silence became frightful. The preacher stood waiting. Everybody forgot that they also were sinners, and waited with him. If the prodigal on the back bench suspected

that this was his affair, he did not show it in a single lineament of his face. His repose was profound. You might have said it was gentle. He really had been moved. He had been changed, but if it had been known how changed, the preacher at least might have fainted. It is astonishing what thoughts, what strange inspirations, will come to a man in church. Suddenly, as Jim sat there with the people before him, he had a sense of them, what they had suffered; the poverty and stringency of their lives touched him half humorously, half compassionately. He did not hear the exhortation nor see the sad, beseeching, mourning faces turned in his direction. He was making up his mind to redeem the place and the people from the dullness and dreariness which stupefied them. He was enjoying the sensation of a humourist and a philanthropist at the same time.

Naturally, Mrs. Martin could not have known this. She arose from her place, fixed her eyes calmly, compellingly upon him, and advanced down the aisle. Nothing is more common still in many communities, especially in the South, than a "church worker" who will go about in the congregation during a revival personally exhorting particularly hardened or refractory sinners.

There was a stir in the congregation, a mere stir. No one turned his or her head any more than you would look in on a boy who is about to be spanked by his mother. Every one expected a severe struggle between Rachel and the prodigal.

Mr. Bone remained serenely unconscious. He was absorbed in the sudden unfolding of his plans for the future. He did not even observe the approach of Mrs. Martin, and it had passed out of his memory what such a visitation might signify. So long a time had elapsed since he had been in a company where one man or woman considered himself better than any other. But Tony saw, and understood with the helpless alarm of a poor sheep whose transgressions have long since relegated him to the company of ill-smelling goats. Mrs. Martin paused halfway down the aisle to take out her glasses and put them on. Tony took advantage of this moment of inattention to slide gently, noiselessly down out of sight. He assumed a cramped but four-legged posture very gratifying to the dog, who accepted the advent as a personal compliment and immediately made room for him.

Rachel was surprised when she got her glasses on. She thought she had seen Tony back there, but she concluded that she must have been mistaken. She went in between the benches and sat down by the prodigal, who at once recalled his attention from the plans he was elaborating and fixed it along with his eyes upon Mrs. Martin. He remembered her as she looked when he was a youth. She had not changed. He recalled that in those days there was an undeclared enmity between them. The nature of it had to do with a certain June apple tree in the Rucker-Martin garden.

She sat down beside him, regarded him serenely over the top of her glasses, and began:

“Jim, I knew your mother. Her grandfather was my grandfather’s second cousin. She’s not here to do for you as a mother would, an’ I’m goin’ to take her place as near as I can.”

It was as if she meant:

“I owe it to the family and cannot allow even a distant relative to be damned without making a conscientious effort to save him.”

Mr. Bone understood, drew his members together, crossed his legs, furred his arms, nodded his head, and gave her a steady, disconcerting attention.

“You’ve been here a month now and this meetin’s been goin’ on and you here every night showin’ no signs of repentance. You’ve come home to stay, I reckon, and we want you to lay aside your wildness, make up your mind to behave yourself, get up off of this bench and go up yonder to that altar and pray for forgiveness.”

“Just as lief!” was the astonishing reply, as if he had not thought of it before. He was not repentant, being of that class of men who grow the way they are going without the pruning of public prayers. And, like many another in a similar situation, he had no compunction about acting a lie, rather than undergo the hysteria of an argument about his soul. Such a man’s soul is always his spiritual x y z which equals the unknown.

“Come along then!” said Rachel, rising and making way for him.

The next moment they advanced down the aisle,

Mr. Bone in front, with his hands tied behind him, so to speak. He was looking straight into the eyes of Sylvia Story. If you did not understand, you might have called it a sacrilege, that queer appeal of the x y z to the unknown other half of his equation. Rachel brought up the rear. You experienced a change of heart at the sight of her. The tears were streaming down her grim old face, softening it. She had done a good deed. The sod of her soul was turning green, was blossoming before your eyes. A fool may become great in the twinkling of an eye. God has arranged it so without reference to our little systems of judgment. The hypocrite is sometimes a saint for one aurora moment, and the saint does not always avoid the lime-light of hypocrisy.

They knelt together, side by side. It was as if Rachel wanted the Lord to see her there. We are all such children as that in the presence of Him, sometimes hiding, sometimes "showing off."

On his knees, the prodigal was immense. On hers, the old tartar saint was no longer absurd.

Sylvia Story was the only person who was sufficiently detached from the scene at the altar to observe what was going on in the back of the house. Slowly the head of Tony Adams reappeared. His fine, thin, blond hair was tousled. He slyly lifted himself to a sitting posture upon the bench. He wore the expression of an actor who has missed his "cue" and been left in the wings on this account. It was an expression of pathetic regret. This was his fate always, and, if by any

chance he got the right "cue," he invariably went on a spree and lost it. The dog crept out in the aisle, sat down, and pointed his nose inquisitively at the kneeling figure of his master. It seemed to him that he had better remain in the background with Tony. He hoped everything would turn out for the best. Still, that was a very queer, unmasterly attitude in which he beheld his master.

Young Mr. Ellis, the minister, stood inside the altar rail, wearing that peculiar animation of the transfigured human. If he had been Peter on the Sea of Galilee and had caught one fish, but a leviathan, in his net, he could not have been better satisfied. Still, he looked out over the congregation and said:

"Is there not another?"

No one moved. Apparently there was not. The sea flowed by in the sweet smile of thankful faces. He lifted his hands.

"Let us pray!"

That is always a majestic sentence. It brings the Maker of the heavens and the earth upon the scene. It banishes the sneers of the world, it makes an atheist look like a rotten gourd. No matter what errors of doctrine went before, nor what shallow sentimentality of singing, nor how many hypocrites or sinners are present, the curtain rises for a moment upon the far eternity of man, and we have a fleeting glimpse of little stars holding up their hands to shut out the too great glory of God.

It is neither here nor there that a few younger prayer messenger angels may have tittered at the dumbness

of the prodigal kneeling so well flanked by saints. A man is as much entitled to his dumb prayers as he is to any others, often more so. And Jim was in an embarrassing position, not before his Heavenly Father, but beside his saints. He knew that he had been changed, but it was not an orthodox conversion, and the fruits of it were to be strange apples of discord in that community. Still, he knelt. It was all a man could do when Rachel set her heart upon it.

I have been obliged to record this scene and these circumstances because these pages are tablets taken from life. And any record of life in the South which leaves out the hornet veteran of the Civil War and the candle-lit drama of salvation in some church is not veracious. It is merely long-tailed monkey fiction, however interesting it may be. In the South we are not good, but we are honestly religious. Our faith in God is so strong that it amounts to a great despair. This is the heavenly hall-mark of simple souls. The fact that most of us are ignoramuses in the practice of Christianity is a stage that will pass. When it is passed, we shall still have "the mighty hopes that make us men." It is the way we are made, poor candles lighted for the glory of God, that shine awhile and are blown out in this wind, to burn again somewhere else. Your New England Yankee and your western apithacanthropoid may trade us out of our houses and lands, but in the end we are the gallant poor in spirit who shall inherit the earth by faith, which is the only unmortgageable way of getting it and holding it.

CHAPTER IX

JIM BONE was not seen again at the revival services. He had gone to Atlanta, in fact, to make extensive arrangements which were to result in another kind of revival in Ruckersville. But he had disappeared without taking any one into his confidence. The good people were mystified. Tony Adams sank again into the insignificance of inebriation, and Bimber was disconsolate. He spent the nights baying at the moon and in keeping a dog "wake" in memory of his master.

We shall have our hands full when he comes back upon the scene. I am, therefore, taking a hurried advantage of his absence to relate another circumstance which stirred the community as nothing else had since the old days when a fresh installment of "Grouped Thoughts and Scattered Fancies" appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*.

Every evening now Elbert White sat in front of his wife with a table between them, upon which burned a kerosene lamp, with a poorly trimmed wick. Scattered about were the loose pages of Amy's Book of Life. Nothing was farther from her mind than that a line of it should be printed. She was content to share the fate of other Ruckersville authors. Her

story was a sort of brocade of the human heart which she left to posterity, the one publisher in whose judgment and appreciation the Ruckersville literary genius had any confidence. She dictated to Elbert queer little elegies upon life. She sketched in the characters of the men and women she knew with a literalness and veracity that was thrilling if you knew how to estimate the difficulty of being truthful in interpreting such a natural hyperbole as man. She narrated little incidents of the day, such as that Captain Martin had gone up town that morning with four dozen collard plants for Mrs. Luster, and that Rachel had been out all day collecting missionary dues, and how Mildred Percey had read a new poem at the "Woman's Club." These were really tag sentences which led to loving scriptures set down in behalf of each person. She was very far from being a mere diary maker. She had the mathematical faculty of the spirit which enabled her to reduce the people of her acquaintance to their little digit in the great common equation of life. Artlessly, without the least suspicion of what she was doing, she destroyed the ideal of each, and calculated him upon the basis of his actual deeds. Nothing can be more devastating to the self-conscious importance of personality than this method. The greatest hero never does more than a dozen great deeds. Most of life is passed in insignificance. Thus the Captain was shorn of his war record and appeared as an old man with a sore on his back, who was not above selling collard plants.

And Rachel was a Shylock, reaping where she had not sowed dimes for the heathens. On a certain evening she devoted a paragraph to the Feltons' baby. It seemed that while Mrs. Felton was pouring out her soul in a romance she was writing, Mr. Felton fed the baby on rancid black walnuts. The next day the child interrupted its mother by having convulsions. Elbert was for leaving the baby out. But Amy protested.

"The point is this, Elbert," she explained. "It is unfortunate to discover that you have any other gift after you have already the gift of a child. I mean that it is really superfluous. You can put all you know into the child; and if you put it into a story the father has to take the mother's place while she is doing it. And a father may be a good provider, but he makes a poor mother. For one, I do not doubt that every hen bird watches with anxiety the worms her mate offers their nestlings. She never can tell when he will poison one with a spider."

It is impossible to set down here the results of Amy's notes. Their insignificance was so literal of life; and their value was incalculable, because probably never before had so close a record been kept of so many different men and women in the same community. You had only to add up each one's column to understand how barren existence is of the extraordinary, how unlike every man and every woman is to the impressions we receive of them in history, where only a few of their best deeds are recorded, or in

fiction, where the imagination selects and augments characters to suit the emergencies of the tale. And the truth so often makes the last come first, and the first come last. Thus, according to Amy, the debit column of Tony Adams was shorter than that of Rachel Martin. Tony was such a poor creature that he dared not do good in the open after the more or less brazen manner of Rachel. But Amy remembered certain days he spent in her garden, and set down her hollyhocks and zinnias to his credit. She recorded of him a thousand aimless little charities, to which he confessed in their hours of confidence, such as trundling old Mr. Percey, who was paralyzed, down in his back yard, and going to mill for a widow who had the corn and the horse, but could not sit astride her own sack on his back. He never attempted anything great in the line of goodness. He felt so unworthy of a shining mark, he desired to escape attention. Virtue, he felt, was so little characteristic of him that he exercised what he had after the manner of the best saints without suspecting that this was the case. It was only in Amy's scriptures that he shone like a shamefaced candle in a naughty world.

But the trouble with most scriptures is that they do not come direct from the source of inspiration. They are copied by some one else, and matter foreign to the original source is thus injected. This is what happened to Amy's Book of Life. Elbert was the unscrupulous medium through which it passed. He had undertaken the writing with misgivings and

merely to humour her. But almost at once he comprehended that she was making "copy" very different from the prevailing fashion of literature in Ruckersville. He was just enough depraved to put into her innocent records matter which fitted sins in the lives of the victims, thus rounding out the tale with a horrible veracity. He was a worm, and he was the amanuensis of a blind angel, and he was a little old fat knave who enjoyed the joke of inserting spitball comments where the effect would be most outraging to sensibilities. Sometimes when she wandered vaguely with that curious liting mental movement of the blind and the inspired near the region of his own mildewed character, he would lift his old head, push back the thin aigrette of white hair at the top of his forehead, and stare at her in genuine alarm. But in time he perceived his security and the nature of it. She saw every one clearly, but him she concealed with the garment of her love.

The excuse he made to himself for the sacrilege of his interpolations was that he desired to render the manuscript available for publication. And in this he succeeded beyond his most sanguine expectations. As fast as Amy produced her scriptures and he could get them into diabolical shape, he disposed of them to the *Monthly Mercury*, a popular magazine, and he appropriated the revenue from them without a qualm of conscience. You do not offer dividends to a blind angel.

Now, on the very day of Mr. Bone's singular dis-

appearance the first installment of this remarkable work came out in the *Mercury*, under the misleading title of "The Town Testament." And it was signed "The Recording Angel."

This was scandalous enough if the contents had not been still more shocking. The thing was neither history nor fiction, but a sort of album of characters. It was written as no story ever is, with the men and women walking through it as if they were going down town upon their own private business and irrespective of an author's desire to herd them together and drive them toward a common climax, as is always the case in fiction, and even in history, but never in life. It seemed that the writer was so lacking in this artistic instinct that he or she made no effort to draw the usual literary puckering string around the situation. Instead of a plot, he or she simply laid off the streets of the town, obviously the town of Ruckersville, and took a snap shot of every man and woman who passed, not from the outside, but from within. This is always bound to be the frightful significance of any Recording Angel literature. Each paragraph flashed before the astonished eyes of the victims like the scene they themselves had made unconsciously in a moving picture show. This really gave the thing a certain dreadful coherence. The whole thing was written in a manner so simple and veracious as to surpass mere literary style. Literary style is always a fashion in words that casts some sort of illusion. This is what it is for. But the scriptures of men and women

in Ruckersville as set forth in "The Town Testament" in the *Monthly Mercury* were clothed in no fashion of words. They were naked — not disgracefully so, you understand, but stripped to the heart of man. The mercy and the cruelty of it were inconceivable. Each sketch was a faithfully stern and tenderly delineated daguerreotype of the inside life, merely dramatized by some incident. And in every case the physical features of the victim were so dimly portrayed as to be vague and indistinct. This, of course, was due to the fact that the Amy-angel was blind and saw only the invisible. But it was a feature of the "Testament" which produced an effect in Ruckersville so queer it bordered upon the ridiculous. Every man and every woman that saw themselves photographed in the little two-legged epigrams of the Angel's entrances were silenced. They were like old Adams and Eves dropping their apple cores to run around behind their fig bushes to read the thing more privately. During the year that these awful scriptures ran in the *Monthly Mercury* not one person in the town discussed them or even mentioned them to his neighbour. There was, of course, the tell-tale eye, but the eye only speaks. It has not a voice. Sometimes the Captain met Clark Story immediately after a new installment of "The Town Testament" appeared with an interrogative expression, which, being interpreted, meant:

"Have you read that damned thing in the *Mercury* this month?"

And old man Story, who had long since recognized himself as the ridiculous optimistic Job of these naively naked scriptures, would shift his eyes about, as much as to say:

“Who? Me? I never read the *Monthly Mercury*. I haven’t the least idea what you are talking about.”

As a matter of fact, Daddisman, who kept a news stand at the hotel, was probably the only man who could have told how many had taken to their fig bushes. From selling three or four copies a month, he now sold about fifty.

This is what happened: On this same day after Jim Bone had signified his repentance, Rachel Martin was sitting upon her front veranda in the early afternoon, thinking of her success with the prodigal the night before and wondering what she could do for the Lord that day, seeing that Jim had disappeared. Presently, like an answer to prayer, a deep suspicion of a certain situation occurred to her. She arose, untied her apron, pinned on her hat (which never would remain straight upon her head because she had so little hair to hold the pins steady), and went over to see Amy White. She found exactly what she expected, the house in disorder, the kitchen stove full of cold ashes, a pile of soiled dishes on the table, and Amy sitting beside her bedroom window with a glass of milk in her hand, and her face veiled as usual in her sweet, blind smile.

“You are starving,” she exclaimed, coming in and standing before her friend with one hand upon each fat hip.

ville. She recognized the very corners, and her neighbours were as plainly portrayed as if she had looked up and seen them going by, in spite of the author's lack of outward description.

There was one stranger in the throng of characters whom she said she did not know. She said that over and over to herself, yet this woman in particular excited her curiosity and indignation:

“And there was a certain woman in the town who went about collecting missionary dues; and this woman's tongue was the rod she laid upon her neighbours' backs.

“And she committed no sins, but God was obliged to forgive her nearly all the good she did.

“For this woman did good as if she were beating the lost and undone, and as if it were a shame that good had to be done at all.”

Rachel laid the *Monthly Mercury* in her lap and looked up. She felt queer, as if an angel had just spit in her face. She wiped it roughly with the corner of her apron. She was wounded, unaccountably wounded, and angry. And she did not know what to do about it, since she supposed the Captain was still down town. If he had been at home she could have worked off her feelings by putting him to bed. She often did this.

Fortunately, she was very far from recognizing him as the hero of the next verse of the Recording Angel's scriptures. The Captain was the one living creature

besides herself who could and did throw dust into Rachel's eyes. She knew all about his backache, but less about him than any other man in Ruckersville.

At this moment he was seated in a secluded corner behind his beegums, also reading a copy of the *Monthly Mercury*. It seemed that the Recording Angel had been wandering along in his or her mind adding up the men of Ruckersville as he came to them, putting in little stories to defend them and to illustrate the general inefficiency of men, comparing them with women, and so on, until he came upon the theory that women neither know nor can know men. Apparently, this was the "total" of a column and a half of illustrations, all taken with startling frankness from the lives of Ruckersville benedicts. They were put together with the distinctness of a formula of experience with the devil's tail sticking out. One incident in particular had been culled from the Captain's most private annals, which he guarded with the sacred care a man always bestows upon his vices, while his virtues may be weather-beaten from exposure. This incident had to do with a certain sum of money given the Captain by Rachel to be credited upon her own account at the bank. Unfortunately, he had lost it in a game of poker before he reached the bank. The Angel seemed to pause and ponder over the curious phenomenon that a man never became so honest that he would not steal from his wife, either her prayers, her confi-

dence, or her money. The conclusion of the whole matter was set down in one of those imitation rib verses from Ecclesiastes, and ran something like this:

“A man may know his wife, but no woman knoweth her husband.”

“If thy husband kiss thee, count thy silver; he may have stolen a spoon.”

“If he praise thee, look for Hager in the bushes; he loveth another.”

This was horrible; not because it was the truth—the Captain never for a moment questioned that—but because incidents had been taken from his own life and hung like mottoes in the tale to prove it. He leaped to his feet, hissing with impotent fury. He clinched his fist and whirled this way and that in his rage.

“I will find him and gut him, the fiend!” he swore softly, looking back to make sure his voice did not carry as far as the stout figure of Rachel, seated upon the veranda.

He was an old reed shaken in the wind, suddenly compelled to share his private character with the unknown. He was bitterly distressed, like a man who posed for his portrait in a gold braided uniform and beheld his thin naked old legs in the negative.

But if others were astonished by the appearance of “The Town Testament,” the “Woman’s Club” was

prostrated. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker was silent, suffering and mystified. She knew that no member of the club could or would write such a thing. The blindness of Amy excluded her as a possibility from any one's mind. The Angel had not honoured Mrs. Rucker with any concluding verse of scriptures. She was merely a poor dunce left sitting upon a stool in the tale, shorn of her greatness, merely a fat old girl who had missed her lesson and was being "kept in" after school by the Angel. The crowning insult to this indignity was that it was apparent in every line that the writer desired neither to punish nor to caricature. It was as if a spirit had determined to tell the truth about everybody in Ruckersville without reference to their station or their feelings. The women of the club suffered most because it seemed that the Angel had them upon his conscience in the form of a compassionate anxiety, and that he really knew what was the matter with them.

**"Fill the heart of a woman, and her mind will not trip thee;
But if thou leavest her loveless, she will split thy hairs with
arguments."**

**"The woman that maketh an idea and pursueth it and teaseth
it into words may write a masterpiece; but she hath poisoned the
milk of her babe."**

**"The mind of a woman dwelleth by nature upon the small
point; it fitteth into the cradle and on the forefinger, but not into
the hat brim of a man."**

Mildred Percey saw one of her poems in print for the first time in "The Town Testament." She could not have been more astonished if she had seen it in the Old Testament. The title was "Loneliness."

*"O heart, thou wert not made
Alone to linger on;
To wander thus, through light or shade,
With one to lean upon.*

*"To look around and see
No pulse to answer thine,
No tender eyes to smile on thee,
No lips to call thee 'Mine.'*

*"The tendril of the vine
That seeks in vain to cast
Its arms around aught besides, must twine
Upon itself at last.*

*"The heart that seeks in vain
Some answering heart to find
Turns on itself, and weaves a chain
That it cannot unbind."*

She had read these lines once at the club; and she did not know it but she had loaned Elbert White a book with a copy of this scribbled upon a loose sheet of paper. She had had a letter from this same magazine declining them. Now they appeared in it like a row of little candles in a drizzling night, flickering and going out one by one. They were preceded by a

sort of epitaph of her character, and after them came this Æsop scripture,

“Man sinneth if he letteth the woman to abide single until the seeds of poetry ripen in her, and she bringeth forth only verses.”

Mildred stared in awe that was nearly superstitious at the signature of the Recording Angel.



CHAPTER X

THE one incredible performance of Mr. Clark Story's life had been becoming the father of Sylvia. It seemed that God had honoured him with a kind of heathen miracle. Not that Sylvia was literally a heathen. She had submitted like any other child to the Christian catechism. But she looked entirely too much like a mere Corinthian virgin.

He had married Mrs. Story off the streets of Augusta years ago, when he had gone there with a drove of cattle for sale. This was the real explanation, of course. Somehow a child will not take after its father if the mother of it has previously earned her living singing to other men. This is no reflection upon the legitimacy of its birth, but it is a tribute to the fertility of the mother's experiences. In the case of Sylvia there could be no question of this sort. She really was the child of her proper father. But if you marry the most charming woman in the world under these circumstances, and she remains as faithful as Ruth to her marriage vows, the next chapter in your romance is apt to be a mysterious and over-endowed offspring. If Mrs. Story had lived long enough to bear another child, it might have been

an equally strange reversion to memory. The reason why the average child is so tamely the replica of its obvious parents is because the average wife has no such memories to bring to bear subconsciously, pre-natally. If women were as corrupt in their youth as many men are, most children would be their mother's mental foundlings, and the offsprings of a composite masculine paternity. Fortunately, Mrs. Story died before she increased the confusion of Mr. Story's parenthood with another remote heir. And he had accepted Sylvia with that adoring admiration this kind of children usually excite in those who have the honour and adventure of begetting them.

But the society of Ruckersville had proved a trifle more squeamish. Only the male portion of it was ready to take Sylvia for better or for worse. From the time she was out of school at sixteen up to the beginning of this story, when she was twenty-five, she could have married any man in it, married or single. This is too much to say for any woman's attractiveness, and this accounted for the fact that Mrs. Fanning-Rucker had never recognized her existence, and that Mrs. Rucker-Martin had never even asked her to join the missionary society. It was true that she seemed to have been properly born, but she certainly did not look like it, and you do not want contaminated money for your heathens. Still she sang in the church choir; but it is a curious fact often observed that any person with a voice like the heavenly hills set to music may sing in any Christian choir. We are demo-

cratic about the voice. But so far as any one knew in Ruckersville she had never been "converted." It was a delicate matter, such a woman's soul. Therefore, she had been left entirely to the consideration of her Maker with the tacit understanding on the part of Ruckersville saints that this was the best disposition to make of such a soul. Amy White was the one woman in the place who cultivated her acquaintance, and Amy was not an exhorter.

In short, Sylvia had had rather a hard time of it, and she promptly took it out of the men, not maliciously, but naturally. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker knew that she could become her daughter-in-law any day. Mrs. Patricia Felton had every reason but one to be jealous of her. Sylvia had explained to poor Mr. Felton that she would not elope with him for the remaining reason that she cordially despised him. She said nothing about its being wrong to elope with a married man, because this was beside the mark, her contempt being a so much greater objection, so far as she was concerned. Captain Martin never missed one of those rare occasions when she appeared on the street to declare his devotion in a manner too flamboyant to be disgraceful, as he accompanied her from one store to another, strutting by her side with his hat in his hand and his old back limbered with the exaggerated bowings and scrapings caused by the romantic ecstasy of his emotions. Tony Adams was wont to affirm futilely with tears in his eyes that she was the one woman in creation designed especially

for the happiness of man. And Tony was right so far. She was certainly designed for nothing else.

But now Sylvia discovered that she was in a predicament. For the first time in her life she had been interested, almost attracted, by a person of the opposite sex, and that person had suddenly disappeared without offering his scalp. For nearly a week she had not seen Jim Bone in the late afternoon upon the opposite hill. So far, his had been a long distance courtship. Still, she recognized it as such, and had calmly waited, cat fashion, for him to draw nearer. Such women do not love, but they desire more than any others in the world to be loved. And at last this had come to her with overwhelming force, the desire to be loved by this wonderful, straddling stranger, whose long shadow fell almost upon her door sill at sundown like a draw-bridge between the hills that he let down for her to walk upon to him. And before she could make up her mind what to do about it he had disappeared, taking his grand shadow and his impudent scalp with him. If she had been one of those anti-climaxes of femininity, a dim star-spirited virgin, she would have spent her nights weeping. But she was merely a natural virgin without any star-spirit at all. So she sat up and wondered with a sort of savage rage what had happened to her, and what was best to do about it. Women of this class are great pragmatists in love. They always get what they want. They never shrivel into reputable old maids. At the worst, they become female bachelors of doubtful reputation. Every one sees

their potentialities so plainly, and they are judged by these rather than by their deeds, which may even exceed in innocency the clinging conduct of the star-spirited. If Sylvia could have found Jim Bone in her surprised, bereaved mood, she would have been perfectly capable of demanding feminine satisfaction of him by wringing his lover's neck for him, figuratively speaking, of course. She was indignant, disappointed, as one would be with a fascinating orator who stopped in the midst of an eloquent peroration, turned his back upon you and left the stage without giving you the chance to reply in the same exalted strain.

She did the only thing she could do under the circumstances: Late in the afternoon of each day she made a pretty toilet and went out to stroll upon the hill herself. If you desire to see a really beautiful woman, observe one who discards mere fashion, and dresses to meet the far greater demands of love. Clothes become an inspiration then. They are the flowing footnotes of a sweetly mysterious personality. You feel that if she did not wear them you could not understand her at all. You could not believe her. But the bodice cut low, the loving, clinging folds of the skirt, the gleaming girdle, tell the tale. They translate to you what she cannot confess with her lips. They say plainly:

“Love me. I am made for that for the next few years, and nothing else!”

You cannot express anything so cold as intelligence,

or science or philosophy in the fashion of your garments without looking like a frump. This is why your merely intellectual woman so often appears so ugly and so absurd. They are fools who do not use the sweet patterns of love when they cut out their hideous clothes.

I am coming now to a certain August evening, the seventh since the disappearance of Mr. Bone from her skyline. She stepped down from the porch in the early twilight looking so white and golden one might have inferred that she expected to be wooed by the stars. As a matter of fact, she was very shrewd. She concluded that if her lover was not gone forever he would return to the hill, and in case he did she purposed to be quite unconsciously adjacent. Women are queer. They really know everything. The only protection that men have is that women do not know that they know everything. They only feel that they do, and you have only to contradict them in order to confuse them.

Thus Sylvia felt with exhilaration and excitement each day that she would surely meet Jim Bone. She was determined to do it. On this particular evening she had predestined it again, fixed it with a rose in her hair. She advanced down the hill from the house like a young beam. She stepped ankle deep in the grass. She held her skirts up and showed the white stems of her being, rising to unimaginable heights out of her little, dusty, high-heeled slippers. Her hair was braided and bound tight about her head. The

nape of her neck glistened between two little thin vagabond curls below the braids behind. Her spreading swallow-winged brows curved above her eyes inquisitively. She wore that exaggeratedly innocent expression a woman assumes when she wants you to think she is looking for something, but not you. For seven days, in the twilight, she had put it on, this manner of looking for something in the grass as she went along. Women are delightfully naive comedians when they wish to find you and conceal themselves. They invariably flutter all their wings in the opposite direction from the way they are really going and thinking. One of them comes tilting along, heading straight for your arms, so to speak, but she pretends (and really believes her own pretence) that she is not thinking of you at all. She is thinking of Ruskin, say, or of Valhalla, or of Idyls of the King, or of something else, oh, infinitely beyond and above mere man! But when she does come upon you in this artless fashion, somewhere in the world, on the street, in a drawing-room, or even a back hall, the very man of all men who is thinking about her, you will know what she is up to by that wide-eyed expression of unfeigned surprise with which she regards you and draws back, and looks, "Excuse me! I didn't know you were here!"

So, I say, it was in this manner that Sylvia Story made her way down the green-skirted hill to where the brook lay like a golden mace in the fading sundown dividing the two hills. She was absolutely absorbed

in her search for mint that grew wild upon the banks. She thought she would see if the geese had been muddying the spring again, and if the water rock under the pasture fence had been washed away by the rain that had fallen that morning. Sylvia, the mysterious, was translating herself, you understand, into the little green words of the field. It all depended upon whether you could read the translation or not. She stood upon the bank, where the grass lay flat like a green fringe that has been drenched by the little flood of summer rain flowing inside. She looked this way and that. She lifted the ruffled whiteness of her skirts a little, held them tighter, stooped and showed the smallness of her slippers and not a modest inch more of the pretty white-stockinged stems of her being. Her head was bent low like a golden blossom in the greenly golden dusk of the evening. If anybody was there to see, he would see, of course. If no one was there to see — well, it is a fact that one has a certain satisfaction in dramatizing one's self by way of practising with only the willows to observe the performance. She gathered a handful of mint. Then she saw that it grew more luxuriously upon the opposite bank. She went back to the foot-log which spanned the stream. The rain had swelled the current until it flowed within a few inches of the underside of this log. She put one foot on the end of it and considered. You have seen exactly the same expression of uncertainty upon a young hen's wing feathers when she makes up her red

comb into a strictly feminine resolution to climb a slick pole that reaches from the earth to the bough on the tree where she intends to spend the night. She starts, balances herself with her wings, falters, drops back to the ground and cackles that she cannot do it. After the third or fourth attempt, she walks along up without the tremor of a feather. All that other had simply been a matinee of the hen-feminine. Sylvia started across the log much in the same mood. Really there is nothing like swiftly flowing water close beneath her for disturbing a woman's equilibrium. She paused, wavered, nearly lost her balance, in fact, jerked her skirts instinctively high, and skipped back to the bank. She composed herself, smoothed her courage, and started the second time. The width of the stream was absurdly narrow to cause such a flutter, less than ten feet. This time she would have made it but for the most unexpected accident. Suddenly, as she was mincing swiftly along, more than halfway across, there was a rush from behind a clump of willows that grew very close, and Bimber, the hound, appeared, leaped upon the other end of the log, every leg limber with ecstasy, ears flapping, tail wagging. She pressed the hand that held the sprigs of mint close to her breast, closed her eyes, dropped her skirts, and threw that hand out instinctively to balance herself. It all happened in an instant, including the quick thud of boot heels beside her on the log. She felt her body lifted, clasped close and swung forward. It seemed best not to



**“SYLVIA CLOSED HER EYES AND THREW HER HAND OUT
TO BALANCE HERSELF”**



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TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
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open her eyes for a moment even after it was all over. But never in the years that followed the dreadful sequel of that hour could she forget the thrilling pungent odour of the mint that lay bruised upon her breast, that fell down in expiring fragrance upon the ground between them as she disengaged herself the next instant and stood looking from the green stain upon her bosom into the enraptured face of Mr. Jim Bone. The thing could not have happened more aptly or more romantically if they had both been characters in a novel.

The dog reeled off a circle around them about the size of the Great Dipper, which was beginning to show dimly in the sky above, then made a handle to it by darting off up the hill. It was as if he had wagged off with his tail:

“Excuse me! I think I smell a rabbit!”

Nothing could have exceeded the intelligence and delicacy of such a withdrawal of a third party at such a moment.

Having no further use for his hands, Mr. Bone thrust them both into his pockets, and stood as usual with his feet wide apart before Sylvia, who was still engaged in getting her breath and in trying to withdraw her eyes from his face.

“Good evening!” he said smilingly.

This was a mistake. There are occasions where a smile is so appropriate that a woman cannot bear to see one. At the sight of this merry contraction of Mr. Bone’s features, Sylvia collected herself. She

was indignant. She showed plainly that she felt she had been wronged. She turned, cast one cool, swallow-winged glance at him, and walked sedately back across the log as calmly as if she had been a migrating lily. She had not said "Thank you!" nor even returned his salutation. He was not so much aggrieved as he was confused. He knew why she came. What he could not understand was why she did not remain. He had a simple, direct mind about women. And for years he had lived among a class of them that were as natural and primitive in matters of love as he was himself. It is good women, you understand, who have invented the only art in the world which they themselves cannot practise acceptably, the art of courtship. If it were left to men, or even to the other kind of women, there would be mating enough and to spare, but no courting. But your good woman feels that she must deceive her lover utterly about every advance she makes and that she can never yield without some excuse for the concession. Thus she exacts enough persuasion to make it perfectly clear to him that she never would have consented of her own accord to anything, but only in response to his overwhelming arguments and prayers. The trouble with Jim was that he had conducted so many affairs with women who came simply for so much a head and did not expect the oratory of love. That would have been superfluous and absurd.

He stood looking after the retreating form of the girl with a deep frown above his nose. The fact is

that Sylvia, who was designed by inheritance for the brothel, was about to be lifted by Mr. Bone's imagination into the sanctity of poetry, that high rampart of love. She drifted along toward the old house, attended overhead by her stars, leaving in her wake a long streamer of fireflies trailed from the grass by the brushing of her skirts. God has a wonderful way of transfiguring his commonest creatures now and then. The queer thing is the ones He does not transfigure. For example, there was Jim Bone, designed by inheritance and everything else for great deeds of one sort or another, who stood beside the running water in the gathering gloom, ugly, gaunt, unilluminated by any possible flash of the imagination. It may be, of course, that God has much less to do with the transfiguring business than we suppose, that it is merely some advantage the Sylvias take of His great lights and shadows.

In any case, Mr. Bone sat down upon the end of the foot-log, clasped his hands around his knees, waited for the dog, and made up his mind that he was more reconciled to loving a woman than he had ever been before since he had been old enough to know much about love or woman.

CHAPTER XI

THE bomb already referred to in these pages exploded two days after the return of Jim Bone from Atlanta. The exact locality of the explosion was a vacant lot on the north side of the square opposite the Confederate monument, and that duck-legged hero's was the one impassive face turned upon the performance. When you have resurrected your dead and exalted them forever into a statue, they stand and observe the uttermost energies of men thenceforth with a terrible calm. They can watch them build a city or conquer an invading army without the least expression of admiration. And they can look at Rome burn with a benignity which the lurid light only enhances, but cannot change. Once you erect a statue, you have belittled and defeated yourself. You cannot compete with it. The thing outlasts you. This is one reason why in those countries where there are the greatest number of monuments to the memory of men and deeds there is to be found the poorest quality of living manhood. And this is why, for one, I have always been thankful that the hero surmounting the monument to the Confederate soldiers in Ruckersville was a trifle too short in the stride. The absurdity seemed to give the surviving descendants of this hero a better chance.

Well, I say, it was a very warm morning in August, one of those days when the sun rises early and gets down to business with as much energy as if the preservation of the whole solar system depended upon making every man sweat. Such a thing as activity in Ruckersville at such a season was unknown. The entire male population of the town was vegetating in the sunshine, listless, comfortable, drowsily acclimated to the heat and to a golden sunlit poverty. They sat in their shirt sleeves beneath the awnings on every side of the square, smoking, spitting, whittling, and engaging in that aimless talk of the constitutionally idle. Captain Martin and Elbert White held a checkerboard upon their respective knees in front of Bilfire's saloon. Each smoked a short-stemmed briar pipe which exhaled an odour that was still pungent for the distance of a block in any direction the wind blew. Elbert held one spatulate forefinger upon his king, uncertain whether to move into the "double corners" or attempt a hurried, leaping march across the board and risk the Captain's attacking his flanks with one of the latter's novel movements which he declared were due to the military training of his faculties.

Two wagons drawn by mule teams were standing in front of the stores and there was some talk of turnip seeds and shuck horse collars across the counter in Magnis & Luster's, but it was tentative. Purchases were never made till the late afternoon, and only then when every ingenuity to cheat the other had failed between merchant and farmer. Three or four of

lounded on the sidewalk outside, silent, hairy-faced, sunburned men with pipes in their mouths. The Southern farmer must never be confounded with that character in fiction, the Southern planter, now an almost extinct animal in that section. The farmer is the planter reduced to his least common denominator, of a slouch hat, a blue hickory shirt, jeans breeches, and a pair of brogan shoes smelling of ground in spring and of red clay at all seasons, and beyond question the stingiest, most shiftless man in creation.

Between this group of country "customers" and the awning of Bilfire's saloon which shaded the checker players Colonel Lark and Colonel Fanning-Rucker sat in chairs tilted back against the wall of the courthouse discussing "local option," a measure which was to come up in the next county election. The enterprising idleness of the Southern village solon reduces all political discussions merely to the moral and immoral. Up to this time in Ruckersville there had never been a question of bond issues or water and gas franchises. Everybody had his own well and his own sputtering kerosene lamp, and political questions consisted entirely of whether or not there should be a stock law in the country and saloons in the town.

"The women and the preachers are at the bottom of this temperance agitation," commented Colonel Lark.

"Curious how women and preachers always gang together politically," mused the young attorney, throwing back his head, opening his mouth and letting out the cigar smoke in soft blue rings.

“Well, the ladies can’t vote, thank God.”

“If they could, this country would be in the hands of the preachers and the poets before night any election day.”

“I don’t know about that, Fanning. If the rest of us turned lovers time enough in the campaign, we could persuade ’em with a billy-doo ballot to vote with us in spite of all the gospel and poetry ever written. You can’t bribe ’em with a drink, nor enough of ’em with new parasols, but there’s nothin’ easier than bribin’ their tender hearts, bless ’em!”

I do not know that I can make you see it as I see it — the gentle, pipe-perfumed calm of Ruckersville upon this eventful morning. But if you are to understand the moral of this simple tale, it is necessary for me to dwell upon it. Years and years ago, it was called the Christian peace of the community. Certainly it resulted, aside from the genial climate, in a very large degree, from a form of religious teaching which prohibited all manner of worldliness. But this is the truth which most preachers have neglected to tell even when they knew it, that if one is in the world, it is especially designed by Divine Providence that he should be of it with might and main. This is where the old revivalist preachers in Ruckersville had slipped up and the town had slipped down. The effort of the church had been to make as many converts as possible and to subtract them from the world, the flesh, and the devil, at any cost. Now, nothing is more praiseworthy, of course, than cheating the

devil out of his own if you can, but it is as impossible to deduct living men and women from the world and the flesh as it is to resurrect the dead. The nearest approach is that most naive and most sincere of mortals, the hypocrite — a poor creature doing its best to be what it is not. The citizens of Ruckersville passed out of the grandiloquent cavalier stage into the sorrows of the Civil War, and, after the Civil War, into the only resignation left, that of “O Lord, revive us!” And there can be no doubt that the Lord would have done so; but it is not in the nature even of the Almighty to revive a community according to a mere religious creed, and especially one that was conscientiously opposed to all forms of worldliness and to the exercise of many natural human instincts. Thus Ruckersville, bereaved of wealth, of prestige, of everything but its bees and its exalted sacrificial virtues, faced them, failed, and sank into apathy. This is the history of thousands of old Southern towns. If you accept an impossible ideal, you insure a bad conscience. And a bad conscience insures loss of hope and of energy and of enterprise. This was why in the mornings the square of Ruckersville was filled with sitting citizens who played checkers, engaged in heated political discussions or theological arguments, and who spent their evenings drinking and swapping horse yarns in Bilfire’s saloon. The men were poor old salts who had lost their savour and yielded with a feeble flourish to the flesh, having no other diversion. They would have liked to yield more explicitly to the

world. But the world had passed them by. The town was merely a little human dirt-dauber's nest left sticking half destroyed to the rafters of time. And the women — well, we all know how pathetically just virtue and nothing else affects the characters of women. They were poor, dear, good creatures, always morally stretched doing their best, which is entirely too great an undertaking for any mortal, especially a feminine mortal.

Now, then, I say, about nine o'clock in the morning on this day in August all this was changed. Ruckersville was to be delivered with a sort of grin from her long trance. Her hammers and saws and wheels were to start and there was to be an amazing lot of ticking and tocking and strange hours striking for the next twelve months.

Just as Elbert White decided that discretion was the better part of valour and had moved his king back into the "double corner," the Captain leaped to his feet, and the board slipped to the ground, carrying with it Elbert's king and two crowned heads of his own who occupied a very strategic position in regard to the "double corner." He stared, as if he were snorting, down the street, like a very thin old war horse with his head over the top rail of a pasture fence. At the same moment Colonel Lark and Colonel Fanning-Rucker also stood up and backed against the courthouse wall and stared down the street. Elbert was astonished. He caught hold of the back of his chair and pulled himself around sidewise in it. He

furrow, which laid off the ground in an irregular and marvellous shape. The negroes with picks fell to widening and deepening the furrow, every stroke of every pick being accompanied by a humorous grunt, and the rhythm of a song which ran something like this:

*“Dig my grave wid er silver spoon,
Lemme down wid er golden chain,
Two turkle doves on mer breast!
Oh, yez! Oh, yez! Oh, yez!
Dig er my grave wid er silver spoon!”*

The jungle of weeds that stood shoulder high and that had sprung on that lot from their forefather weeds for fifty years fell before the scythe, a flock of pigeons dropped down and entered into the spirited confusion of the scene, strutting about among the freshly turned sods, with an eye to business. Even Tony Adams took off his coat, set his narrow-brimmed straw hat on the back of his head, put his hands in his pockets, and passed from one side to the other directing the work of excavation as if it were a matter of buried treasure. Having had a good deal to say about the breaking of the lines by the plow, Bone and James immediately withdrew as if they had more important business in another part of town.

All the time the regular population of the square stood in the background stretching from beneath the awning of Bilfire's saloon nearly half a block, like the straggling teeth in an old wornout comb, some short,

some tall, all warped and bent with curiosity. The only thing positively known was that on the previous day Jim Bone had purchased two pieces of property in Ruckersville, this vacant lot and the old Joseph Rucker place, which, as I have already indicated, stood upon a gentle eminence near the centre of the residence portion which lay almost entirely to the west of the square. Both were owned by a syndicate in Atlanta, the same syndicate, in fact, holding mortgages upon half the real estate in the town. Now it appeared that some sort of building was to be erected upon the vacant lot — Colonel Lark, in fact, having issued a permit as mayor the evening before for this construction, but it was at an hour of the day when he could not be sure of himself and he could not recall details, if, indeed, Mr. Bone had mentioned any. He looked appealingly at Fanning-Rucker, as much as to inquire if he remembered anything of the circumstance, but Colonel Rucker was determined not to be implicated in the scandal. He declared hastily that he had not been with Colonel Lark the evening before, as much as to say that under no circumstance would he have his name coupled with anything relating to the affairs of a person so dubious as Jim Bone.

“If it’s another store, he’ll fail,” commented Magnis, a merchant with a wrinkled, dried-apple face.

“There ain’t enough trade in this country to keep any of us goin’,” agreed Luster.

“I don’t care what he’s fixin’ to do, he’ll fail. There hasn’t been a successful business in this town since

I have been post-master," agreed Martin. But nobody noticed or respected his opinion because he was a Republican and held an office which by rights belonged to a Democrat.

Suddenly the old Captain broke ranks, and started across the square with the challenging spur-clicking air of a very thin old game rooster who would suffer no intrusion upon his barnyard, even if he lost every neck feather he possessed.

"Mr. Adams, may I ask you what manner of breast-works you are raising here in this peaceful community?" he demanded of Tony, whom he found squatting with a spirit level in one elbow of the shallow trench.

"Have to ask the General, Captain; I ain't in his confidence no deeper than this ditch," answered Mr. Adams, looking up, smiling.

"Well, sir, all I have to say is, that it's a damned outrage that such a business should go forward without the knowledge or consent of this community that knows what it needs and what it don't need better than a buckle-banded, pistol-bellied outlaw!" with which explosion he turned and hastened back to his comrades.

Halfway across the square he passed Bilfire. The fact that Jim Bone had a way of setting down his glass with a scowl every time he emptied it in the saloon caused Bilfire to fear that he was about to have a rival in the whiskey business. He was a large man with a head like a maul. He always wore a long white apron and went without his hat.

He halted just above the spirit leveller in the trench, stood with his hands behind him fiddling with his apron strings, and looked at the excavations with his red nose wrinkled by a sun smile.

“Tony,” said he, “what the hell are you doin’ over here?”

Once more Mr. Adams turned up his blond, vacuous, batter-cake face and widened it with a grin.

“Damfi know, Billy.”

“What do you think you are doin’?”

“Well, Jim says he’s fixin’ to revive and redeem the town. That’s all he told me.”

Bilfire placed a fat leg in front of the other, drew back, pulled out his thick red neck, closed one eye, and squinted along the line for the foundation; then he set his foot down in it and stretched his apron as he stepped it off, counting his paces.

“‘Tain’t a saloon anyway,” he remarked with every appearance of relief. “Nobody but a damn fool would put up a saloon with a fifty-foot front.”

He withdrew to his place of business, where custom was brisker than usual, owing to the fact that the excitement of the morning called for a steadying of the nerves of the citizens. You will have observed this difference between men and women of strong emotion. The former instinctively demand a “bracer.” They depend upon their stomachs to help them to rise to the occasion. It is the place where they keep their altar fires, and the engine room of their valour. And but for this useful organ of the

body more of them would show the white feather. As it is, the most timid man alive can take three drinks and face an army with every sensation of cheerful heroism. And, personally, I venture the suspicion that no man would voluntarily risk the most glorious death a hero ever died without at least one bottle of champagne if he could get it. But women do not know how to stoke the spirit with stimulants. They have the martyr instinct more highly developed, which does not require a cocktail for submission. If they must, they can go down to the gates of death primly, a little tearfully, and, apt as not, with empty stomachs. No one ever heard of a respectable woman about to become a mother asking for a drink to fortify her for the ordeal. But if children had to be born of the other sex, probably not one would get into the world until the afflicted parent was in a state of delirium tremens.

CHAPTER XII

IT MAY have been two hours after the events recorded above that the town of Ruckersville sustained another shock.

Mrs. Martin was seated in her bedroom. The house was pervaded by the odour of boiling cabbage. This indicated that she had put on dinner and was now at lesiure to invite her soul, a situation not so incongruous as it smelled. Women are often obliged to accommodate the needs of their spiritual natures to their domestic environment. Mrs. Martin suffered from a conscientiousness which did not permit her to indulge in merely religious devotions so long as the breakfast dishes were unwashed. In fact she never could call her soul her own until dinner was "on," and hot enough to boil. Then she relaxed her material nature, abandoned her carnal mind, and withdrew to her bedroom for an hour of prayer and other devotional exercises. On this particular morning she was in an unusually peaceful frame of mind. She sat spread out comfortably in her chair. Her thin gray hair was drawn up to the severest point on the back of her head and wound into a knot so small and tightly twisted it might have been a little coiled worm. Her face down to the last crease of her double chin was

fiery red from her exertions. And she could not have worn a more matter-of-fact expression if she had been about to sew the top button on the garment of her spirit. Two or three volumes lay upon the window sill beside her. It is a circumstance you may have observed that old men and old women nearly always contract this window-sill habit according to their characters and general dispositions. If it is a rheumatic old man, he will lay his pipe and tobacco there. He will pigeon-hole his letters between the sash and the sill. And if any one moves either the one or the other, he is more disturbed than if his pockets had been robbed. If it is a religious old woman, you will find her button basket, her knitting, with the long steel needles sticking out at fierce angles, and, above all, you will observe her open Testament. They are the prim witnesses of the fact that she has ceased to waste her leisure in any adorning considerations of the flesh and has withdrawn from the world to hibernate in the scriptures in the soothing occupation of turning stocking heels. In addition to a very homely, rusty-backed Testament upon Mrs. Martin's window sill, there was a sock for the Captain which had reached the crucial knitting needle stage where the toe was being narrowed, an old strawberry-shaped emery for sharpening her needle, a bit of beeswax, a thimble, a quarrelsome looking pair of scissors, and two thin volumes on the slum life of the poor. These were really Mrs. Martin's dime novels, although she was very far from suspecting the fact. If you

want to know who reads the worst and most harrowing literature in the world, observe the old ladies who are interested in home and foreign missions. They make a spiritual business of acquainting themselves with the most degrading details of the most degraded lives. They read with an ominiverous appetite stories of actual licentiousness that would revolt the average reader of decadent fiction. This is why the returned missionary is always sure of an audience and of an enthusiastic interest. He seeds his sermon or lecture with horror tales which appeal to this same diseased imagination. Saints often have the most naively corrupt minds in the world. Mrs. Martin was herself a waddling encyclopædia of slum debaucheries and heathen scandals. There was nothing that the worst woman in the worst dive could do with which she did not have a sort of sighing, praying, vicarious acquaintance, a fact largely responsible for the suspicion with which she regarded all adolescent instincts toward dancing and strolling and courting. She never could see an unmarried man and woman exchanging sweetly Shakesperian glances without suspecting them in the light of all her moral reading about the uses and abuses of passion, of kissing on the sly. And no one will deny that every child in existence is living proof of the grounds of her suspicions. The only question is, which is the more reprehensible, the natural procreating glances exchanged between lovers or the eavesdropping eyes of the saint who intercepts and reads them.

Mrs. Martin found the book of Leviticus in the in-

teresting. She had just finished a chapter setting forth certain laws and restrictions regarding how far a man could and could not look at a neighbour's wife, and she was about to get down upon her fat old knees to pray when two things occurred simultaneously to distract her attention. First, there was a soft explosion from the kitchen attended by the disagreeable odour of burning cabbage. Her pot had boiled over. She had leaped to her feet with astonishing agility. But she had not gone halfway to the door leading to the kitchen before she was appalled by a crash that rent the pleasant silence of the cloudless summer morning like a thunderbolt. She stood for an instant in frightful suspense between curiosity and the instinct to save her dinner, when again the terrific crash was repeated, and she yielded the cabbage and ran out upon the veranda to see if the world was really coming to an end. It is a fact that she had long expected this catastrophe, especially in Ruckersville, where she knew wickedness to abound. It is a thing worth noting that a certain class of pious people do come to that stage of vindictiveness in their religious experience when they expect the Lord to get mad and destroy the world. You never hear of an atheist, or even of an agnostic, prophesying such a destruction. It seems that neither of these has the faith to believe the Creator will do so mean and sudden a piece of tremendous mischief. But a ferocious saint is perfectly capable of entertaining the hope by way of justifying his own indignant opinion of sinful man, and

even of predicting it. More than once Mrs. Martin had shaken her head at the goings on in Ruckersville with intimations about a day of wrath. But now as she stood on the veranda of her house, leaning with one hand against a tall white pillar of it and shading her eyes with the other, she trembled. When you come down to the uncertain feeling of it in your own bones, nobody wants the Lord to be too literal and comprehensive in His wrath. She looked this way and that, working her features into a fearful sun smile. A flock of frightened birds flew past. A man driving a team had pulled up in the middle of the street and was sitting upon the pole of his wagon looking back over his shoulder. She saw the head of Mrs. Fanning-Rucker still in its night cap sticking far out of her bedroom window, craning this way and that. Next there was a rush of feet on the sidewalk, and she beheld a long strand of men and boys running toward the square. The Captain led this flying company. His hat merely clung to the back of his little old bald head; his moustache bristled. He was hopping along with his thin arms spread like featherless wings, but the instinctive desire to fly was apparent in every movement. Behind him came Luster and Magnis and Bilfire, all with their features sharpened to an interrogation point, while Elbert White shambled far behind, his knees hindering him as usual, his coat on his arm, his blood-shotten eyes swimming beneath the swollen lids, his head lifted, and his lower jaw sagging.

"Elbert," screamed the old lady, "what on earth is the matter?"

Elbert was short-winded; he had no breath to spare in words at such a moment. He merely waved his hand in a certain direction as he went by. She followed it with her eyes, and beheld a sacrilege.

Upon a gentle eminence standing among the huge bolls of many ancient oaks she saw the old Joseph Rucker mansion standing like an old woman whose nose and chin are about to meet. The long fluted columns that supported the gable roof of the front porch lay prone upon the ground, the roof itself sagging nearly to the floor below, while a dozen men leaped about upon the main building shoving and pushing at it with ramming beams. Even in that instant the nose and chin met, the roof groaned, dropped sadly, then fell, filling the air with the sound of splitting timbers and enveloping all with a cloud of dust. Mrs. Martin stood dumfounded. If she had seen ghouls robbing a tomb in the old churchyard behind she could not have been more horrified than she was at this sight of men ripping off the weatherboarding and romping up and down the half-disclosed ribs of the ancient house. When the dust cleared, she put on her glasses, and distinctly saw Jim Bone, on the ground below, waving his arms and shouting orders to the destroyers. She looked about like a mariner cast into a stormy sea, for a refuge from her own distracted senses. Then, for the first time, she caught sight of Amy White seated by the window of

her little old house across the street, weaving her fingers in and out with a long thread among her shining beads. Her serene face showed in the shade like a gentle epitaph upon all human follies. Mrs. Martin was indignant. She threw her apron over her head and waddled down the walk from her house, flung the gate open, came out, slammed it, hurried across, opened the one to Amy's yard, which sagged and refused to close, flip-flapped in her old heelless slippers up the narrow path which led to the entry, set one foot upon the step, and could contain herself no longer.

"Amy," she cried, "I do believe you'd sit there and never move if Gabriel blew his trumpet!"

Amy lifted her blind face, curved her lips into a Paradise smile.

"I reckon I would, Rachel," she said.

"Do you know what's happenin' right here under your nose?"

"No; what?"

"Jim Bone's got a dozen niggers over yonder in the grove tearing down the old Jo Rucker house. Didn't you hear the columns fall?"

"I may have, but I didn't notice."

"Well! It jarred the ground, and you didn't notice!"

Amy laid down her band of beads, took the end of her thread and began to feel with it for the eye of her needle with that curious insistent intelligence of the blind.

“When I first lost my sight every sound frightened me. Then when I understood that it was no use, that I could never save myself from any danger, I ceased to be afraid. I reckon I have more trust than you who see. I used to be afraid of storms here by myself. But now the lightning could zigzag across my face and the thunder might shake the house, but I’d sit and fear not. When you are blind you come to the place where you can trust the thunderbolt as if it were a little child with flowers in its hands.”

Rachel was looking up at her from the yard outside. She could not comprehend such trust as this. She was nervous about storms, she was always afraid there might be an earthquake. She did not like to think how she would feel if God did actually carry out his wrath and destroy the world. But as she stood there, the tall grass waving its little feathery seed plumes in the gentle breeze, bedimmed by this faith of her blind friend, she suddenly recalled the burning smell in the kitchen.

“Lòrd ’a’ mercy, my cabbage! I left ’em boilin’ over!” she exclaimed, as she wheeled and trotted off, leaving Amy to dream out a sentence for her Book of Life about the marrow of faith being blindness of one sort or another.

On this same afternoon Miss Leonora Bell, who was that funny thing, the lady principal of the Ruckersville Academy, was returning home. She was preceded by a group of fat and lean little girls who were “talking about her.” This is what all little girls do for the

distance of a quarter of a mile immediately after they have been delivered from the intellectual claws of any lady principal. They were giggling and looking back over their shoulders at her and commenting upon the stringency of her discipline and the injustice of her demands upon their eternally tadpole faculties. And they were relating in explosive whispers the secret victories they had that day achieved over both. But more particularly they were discussing the sudden change in the unfrizzled severity of her appearance. For she had dawned in the school-room that morning with her thin black locks extravagantly curled. This had never happened before. The author of "Man the Orang-outang" had always worn her hair parted in the middle and drawn back smoothly like a carefully punctuated sentence in "Quackenbos' Rhetoric." They were at a loss to account for this extravagant crimping. They were very far from suspecting that she was still capable of a sort of vinegar sentimentality, and they would have been awed into something like sympathy if they could have known that the little, thin, dark, sharp-featured old maid whose heels were clacking along behind them on the brick pavement was at the moment thinking tremblingly of the possibility of meeting Mr. Jim Bone, who was often seen in the late afternoon coming from the opposite direction along this same street. Like every other unmarried woman in Ruckersville, Leonora was in love with him. She would not admit it, of course, but her hair did. Every stiff wave of it was

a tribute to the marvellous and outrageous **fascination** of that wicked prodigal. If the silent, **secret**, futile romances of any village could be gathered up and set down in a book they would augment the **sentimental literature** of the world a hundredfold more than those other affairs that ripen into reciprocity, courtship and marriage. And it would be discovered that maiden women are lonesome moving **figures** in nearly all of them. These romances, guided virtuously by their faded heroines into the innocuousness of **manless sequels**, record in fact the waste material of every civilized community. And they are inspired by the inhumanity of men, who do not ask as many women in marriage as are entitled to this excellent **martyrdom**.

As Miss Bell was about to pass the gate of the Yancey residence she saw Mildred Percey sitting upon the shaded veranda with Mary and Agnes. They were each looking supernaturally young and tinted and gay in freshly laundered muslins.

"Come up, Leonora, and hear the news!" called Mary.

She went in, regarding her friends curiously as she advanced along the walk. It seemed to her a **strange circumstance** that she had not seen either of the three with their hair curled and puffed in this **manner** since they were girls together. She wondered **what it meant** more than she wondered what news they had to tell. News in Ruckersville was a **poor commodity**. It usually consisted in some gossip about the **indis-**

cretion of boys and girls, a picnic scandal, or the announcement of the birth of another baby. Infants, who have no chance to look the situation over beforehand or to choose a better business opening for life, are born oftener, it seems, in such places as Ruckersville than in more prosperous surroundings.

Agnes went in and returned, drawing after her a lagging wicker rocker. Leonora dropped into it with an air of fainting relaxation.

"We were just discussing Jim Bone," said Mary.

"They say he met the sheriff face to face this morning," explained Mildred.

"Which killed the other?" inquired Leonora.

"That was the queer part of it. He offered him a cigar."

"Who offered which a cigar?" demanded Miss Bell, who hated ambiguity and battled against it every day in the composition class.

"The sheriff, Mr. Barfield, of course," answered Mildred. "The Captain came by and told father about it. He says that Barfield says that Mr. Bone explained everything so satisfactorily that the warrant has been dismissed and that they were actually seen crossing the square together this morning arm in arm. He says everybody is disappointed in the sheriff and that he'll be defeated for office this fall, and that it wouldn't surprise him if Bone himself should be elected instead."

Barfield was the typical sheriff in appearance. He wore a long, drooping, black moustache that hung

down like a brace of pistols under his nose, a wide-brimmed, black slouch hat, and looked like the stage villain in a cheap melodrama. He was one of the most timid men alive, but nature had endowed him, apparently, as a sort of joke, with a ferocious expression. And it was upon the reputation of this fierce expression that he had held his office. As a matter of fact, he considered it a frightful accident when he met Bone that morning, and no one ever knew what actually passed between them further than that Barfield was seen to offer him a cigar and then walk on with him on terms of friendly conversation.

“I never thought Tom Barfield was anything but a legal scarecrow,” commented Leonora.

“But that is not the greatest piece of news,” interrupted Agnes.

“No, they say Jim Bone has bought that vacant lot just in front of the monument to the heroes in gray ——”

—“And he has not only bought the old Jo Rucker place, but he’s tearing it down to-day and ——” Mary put in, but Mildred, ignoring her, went on about the vacant lot enterprise.

—“And this morning they began breaking the ground for the foundations for some kind of building. The Captain told father ——”

—“And by twelve o’clock they were hauling off the beams and weather-boarding to be used in the construction of the building on the square ——”

Mary interrupted again, but Mildred held to her original theme of this strange enterprise.

—"That he had brought an architect from Atlanta with him and that he is offering to employ every idle man in Ruckersville to help with the construction, and ——"

"The construction of what?" demanded Leonora, looking from one to the other.

"Nobody knows what!" chimed in all three ladies in high treble voices.

"That is why we are all so excited," Mary began.

"They say Jim Bone is the most popular man in town. Everybody is talking to him and asking him questions about what he is doing. But he just laughs and tells them to wait and see."

"Captain Martin told father that Mr. Bone told him that he was preparing to redeem the town," said Mildred. "So Mrs. Martin thinks he is building another church. And she feels very badly about it. She says apt as not he is a Presbyterian or something and that now the religious harmony of Ruckersville will be destroyed with denominational dissensions."

"He has made Tony Adams boss of the hands working on the foundations. And they say it is a sight to see him strutting up and down ordering the negroes about. I reckon it is the first time Tony was ever at the head of anything," mused Agnes.

"Well," snapped Leonora, "if he gets the men in this town to work, he will come nearer redeeming it than the preachers ever do with their revivals."

During the whole of this conversation each woman was casting side-note glances up and down the avenue in search of the hero of their combined conversation. Each gave little furtive dabs with her hands at her stray locks and pats to her draperies. They took out their back combs slyly and raked up the straggling hairs from the back of their necks and eased the combs in again carefully. It was funny that not one of them suspected that the others shared her thoughts and anticipations.

Suddenly a silence settled upon them, a quivering bird-winged silence, as if the claws of their spirits gripped tighter the swinging bough of love's hope, and their heads turned modestly sideways so that they looked out upon the street archly and obliquely as if they were not looking at all. The object of their speculation swung around the corner in this moment and walked with his usual deliberate straddling gait past the house. His hat was tilted forward at the romantic ambush angle. His chin was drawn down in contemplation. He was accompanied by the dog, who had his tongue out, his tail at half mast, and appeared to share his master's preoccupied mood. Neither of them looked to the right or to the charming lady-besprinkled left. The rough, thumping rustle of the straps on Mr. Bone's boots as they rubbed together at each step thrilled and excited the company on the veranda.

"Why does he wear those horrid boots?" murmured Mildred.

"Better ask where he is going!" commented Leonora

with suspicion, the depth of which was emphasized by her sotto voce.

"He goes by here at this hour every afternoon," agreed Mary.

You may have observed this, that it is perfectly legitimate for a man to be going toward town at any hour of the day; but if he wishes the suspicions of the entire female population of any village, let him be seen going regularly at the sundown hour toward the open outer regions of moonlit darkness. And they are usually quite right to entertain such suspicions. Men do not love nature enough by itself to keep an inanimate tryst with it. They are justified in supposing that there is a strictly feminine star about to shine somewhere upon his hawthorn skyline who engages his astronomical enthusiasm.

"It is rumoured that he goes to see Sylvia Story," said Agnes, primly, after a pause, thus voicing the secret despair of her companions.

"That is a mistake," exclaimed Mildred quickly, as if she would defend the reputation even of the prodigal. "Fanning-Rucker told me that Sylvia told him she had never so much as spoken to Mr. Bone."

"I must be going. I am tired to death," said Leonora dully, as she arose and gathered up her school-ma'am papers. Her light had passed and gone out. The muscles of her face relaxed. Her cheeks sagged. All the little wrinkles in them let go and curved downward forlornly. It was as if Fate had post-marked her from the dead letter office.

CHAPTER XIII

I AM obliged to employ the historical method in this chapter. And by historical I mean that method by which the greater and most important portion of the people concerned are left out of the narrative, and a few men and women become the lay figures of it, clothes horses upon which the writer hangs only those deeds that reflect the high light of achievement. This is as much a matter of regret to me as it can possibly be to the reader. For we have all observed what a decimating thing, humanly speaking, history is. It reduces every hero down merely to his deeds. A sentence is devoted to his personality, and fourteen chapters to what he accomplished. This is why the average person with a natural mental palate finds history so uninteresting. The authors of it so rarely condescend to tell the shape of the victorious general's nose, or whether he wore a moustache or was clean-shaven. The fault of not putting in more personal portraiture is illustrated by the tenacity with which we cling to it when the least little anecdote of it is included. Has any one who has read the biography of Cromwell ever forgotten that he had a mole on his nose? And no one will deny that the history of the French people is particularly interesting because the French person-

ality is so closely related to comedy and melodrama that even the historians have been unable to entirely expurgate their heroism of its antics and tears. But how much easier it would be to remember all the details of the Battle of Waterloo if some of the staccato comments of the French soldiers smeared with mire and blood on that day had found their way into the narrative, or if some historian with real bowels had revealed the fact that the Duke of Wellington was slightly bow-legged and that two and a half feet higher up he was inordinately fond of raw onions. This would have introduced the little mortal deviation from the absurdly perfect which differentiates the man from the mere hero, and it would have insured that little line of caricature without which no human achievement exists or can be set down veraciously. This is why the heroes of history sustain the same relation to the living men they really were that a machine-turned vase sustains to one moulded by hand. The former may be had for fifteen cents each, but the latter, thumb-dented by the mind of an artist, is of enormous value.

Still, there is some excuse for the historian. It is the same I make for this chapter. There are not enough historians in the world to write the life of even one man, and a volume of a thousand pages would be required to dramatize the life of Ruckersville during the three months which followed the tearing down of the old Jo Rucker mansion, the opening of a stone quarry upon the ground where it stood, the hauling off of the great beams and the stone used in that

other mysterious building which Jim Bone was erecting on the north side of the square. The whole town was in a state of hysteria. When you have been in a Rip Van Winkle trance for forty years, you are apt to awaken with a start at the sound of hammer and saw and incessant clinking of stone masons in your very midst. It was as if Bone had poked a long stick into an old hornets' nest and ruthlessly wagged it to and fro. The streets swarmed with excited citizens, who buzzed and darted about from one group to another. That which had created even a greater sensation than the new building was the hasty opening of the stone quarry. It appeared that the founder of Ruckersville had chosen a valuable granite foundation upon which to build, and had blasted his wine cellar out of the solid rock. And it was a fact that some of the stones which went into the Bone building in the square were soaked and stained with this ancient grape juice. But the people of the town were not so much impressed with the opening of a new industry which insured employment to every idle negro who could blast or strike a chisel as they were with the sacrilege involved. It was as if Bone had broken into the underground mausoleum of Ruckersville and was dragging up the very foundation of its traditions. Even the tombstones in the adjacent churchyard appeared to lean over upon their elbows aghast. As a matter of fact, many of them had been leaning for a quarter of a century, but the din of the hammers in the quarry, the sudden blasts, the outrageous "Casey Jones" chorus of the

negroes singing in rhythm with the strokes gave an expression and a meaning to these tumbling monuments as if the dead beneath had been disturbed and were turning over in their sleep and rumbling their headstones. A sort of indignation meeting was held in the church one Sabbath evening after services, where it was decided to "move the cemetery" beyond earshot of Bone's devilish activities.

The Captain, who was far from being a religious man, was the spokesman who laid the situation before this meeting. And it was an hour bordering upon triumph in the church when circumstances united his heart and interests with those of the good people. There was a gentle stir in the evening congregation, like the rustle of its spiritual feathers, when the pastor, Brother Ellis, at the close of the last hymn, arose, and, instead of pronouncing the benediction, said:

"Brethren and sisters, we have with us to-night Captain Alexander Rucker-Martin, who wishes to say a few words upon a subject very near our hearts."

Brother Ellis then stepped back, turned two long, mournful coat tails to the congregation for a moment, faced about, parted them, and let himself down in his chair at the rear of the pulpit, with the air of a man who is sitting down upon the Holy Scriptures and feels utterly unworthy of the privilege. His long, white face bore that clean-shaven, chastened expression peculiar to ministers who feel and preach that they are pilgrims and sojourners in this world, which is not good enough for them or any other Christian man.

Immediately the Captain arose from somewhere out of the bosom of the congregation, side-stepped his way past a dozen knees, reached the aisle and went down it with his head up, his white shirt swelling out in front like the breast of a pouter pigeon. His moustache bristled, his little white peg goatee working with the emotion of his chin muscles. He wheeled when he reached the chancel rail like an old military relic on parade, sighted along the gun barrel of his memories with a fiercely focused expression, and began.

“My friends, it is well known to you that I have not been as good a Christian soldier as I have been just a soldier.”

He paused with the air of a veteran addressing the home militia.

“A cankering wound does not fit a man for the millennium so much as it preserves him in the memories of the battle-rimmed past. But —” he drew himself up like a sentry about to challenge his death angel — “I have a duty to the dead. They were my comrades. I am an old stalk left wind-blown but still standing upon a deserted field. I am here to-night in the midst of graves —” He waved his hand toward the open windows through which every tombstone glistened, and with the swing of his feeble arm the church vanished, the scalloped rows of men and women before him were instantly outside wandering in their thoughts from one quiet mound to another. “In these graves for forty years men sleep who stood shoulder to shoulder with me in the fog rising from twenty-five thousand

Yankee guns in the valley below Missionary Ridge. They outnumbered us nearly a hundred to one. But we stood like a crown of terrible thorns upon that great hill till nearly every man fell. You remember how most of us were brought back home to you, dead and dying, to be buried around this church where we were christened and learned our a, b, ab's in faith. There has not been one hour of my life since when I have not felt out of place above ground." He went on with a sob: "It's a sort of disgrace to survive such men in such a battle, and never till now have I been reconciled, never till now have I understood the strange dispensation of providence which left me so outraged among the inglorious living. But within these last weeks I have discovered my own faith in the Great Commander. My friends, I am the sentry left to guard the sacred sleep of my comrades. And I am here to-night to call your attention to the unholy clamour by which their repose is disturbed and to propose that we break camp and withdraw beyond the din that has been raised over there!" He pointed indignantly at the quarry, shining white and dishevelled like an immense, looted sepulchre among the trees upon the knoll on the outside of the churchyard. "I not only propose, I demand, that we remove the ashes of our ancestors and our heroes to such a distance from the irreverent new activities of this town as shall insure their repose. The living owe but one debt to the dead, they shall *requiem in pace!*" exclaimed the old man with a flourish and a passion which implied that the dead may also

suffer from a helpless insomnia. He wheeled and marched back to his seat with the air of a veteran who has fired his last shot and is willing to die by the issue.

This was the beginning of an agitation which resulted in the resolution of the citizens of Ruckersville to purchase a cemetery beyond the edge of the town and to remove the ashes of its former citizens to a safe distance from the increasing noise of Jim Bone's enterprises.

But when the Captain himself skipped from one block of granite to another around the quarry the next day to where Bone was watching a charge of dynamite, and informed him of this decision, he received another shock.

"It's a good idea," commented that worthy, without even lifting his eyes to observe the effect of his opinion upon the Captain. "The people of this town have been drinking water that seeps and drains through dead men's bones till they have caught the contagion of being dead, to say nothing of the fever we get from it. If you agree, I'll buy the church and ground as soon as you move your tombstones and ashes, and I'll pay you enough for it to build another church farther from the quarry — not that I expect to operate it yet on Sundays!" he added with whimsical impudence.

The Captain balanced himself like a skipping, bony statue upon a huge boulder of granite, waved his cane futilely in the air, batted his eyes with snapping rage, all in vain. Mr. Bone continued to stare down at the

man who was gently manipulating the fuse connected with the charge of dynamite.

“And what will you do with the church?” he sputtered at last, no longer able to restrain his curiosity.

“Haven’t decided yet,” replied Bone; “convert it into a factory of some kind. Thinking some of back bands or horse collars.”

“Damme, sir! Would you take the house of God for such vulgar purposes?” exclaimed the Captain.

“If anything belongs to the Lord, everything does, this quarry as much as that church. And it’s as much a service to man to give him the means of a livelihood in this world as it is to give him the gospel for another. Turn about is fair play. He’s had preaching out of that old church for nearly a hundred years. He’s been taxed to build it, keep it in repair and support it; now let it shelter an enterprise where he can earn a living.”

The Captain stood like a man who felt the devil’s horns near him, but could not see them. He was silent, reaching this way and that mentally for the forked tail of the argument with the honourable intention of pinching it. But before he could get his spiritual finger nails in the right place, Bone took the cigar he was smoking out of his mouth and turned upon him a countenance so coolly conscientious with a new and blasphemous kind of morality that the Captain almost caught his breath as he listened.

“Understand me,” Bone went on; “I begrudge no man his faith, but we are come to the time when we

must practise it more and merely sing about it less. That makes hypocrites. It's obliged to make hypocrites. It doesn't amount to anything, giving all your goods to feed the poor, nor swapping lies about the heathens; it just impoverishes you and makes you the victim of a sing-song piety. If God made all the stars, He's a terrible busy, enterprising God. He's got 'em started and goin' so that the heavenly bodies go on baking and cooling seven days in the week. You needn't tell me the Creator rests on Sunday. It's just a figure of speech. He's stoked His fire so that the oven of the universe goes on baking little biscuit planets clean through the Sabbath. And there's no astronomer that records that any of His shining works pull off their little vaporious shirt tails on Sunday, put on fresh ones and go to divine worship. The only worship you can see any sign of in the heavens is the obedience to the law of life and growth and death and resurrection again into life and so on. Nothing religious, bound to God, ought to be idle. That's the trouble here in Ruckersville. You count too much on just redeeming grace and your missionary collections and church dues. You just know the hymns and scriptures, you never have noticed the actual ways of God, as you call Him, nor the example He sets along the lines of healthy industry. I'm no preacher, but I'll be danged if I don't believe I'm fixing to be a practical theologian, and if it can be done, I aim to redeem this town!"

It is a strange coincidence that the longest, most self-

revelatory speech made by the hero so far should be recorded in a chapter devoted merely to the tabulation of certain incidents. And I am myself at a loss to account for it. He entered these pages as a griping lover, and nothing was further from my mind or expectation than that he should develop the other Doctor Jekyll of his character. But every man has the personality of many different individuals in him. Fortunately, most of them die undeveloped; otherwise, every thief would also be an honest man, and every honest man a thief. When God created man He made the ancestor and son of all paradoxes. Jim Bone, for example, might have remained to the end of this tale merely the lover of Sylvia Story and the unattainable masculine ideal of every other unmarried woman in Ruckersville if he had not attended revival services in the church and caught an unbiased vision of the situation by construing the piety of Ruckersville into an explanation of its dogmatic respectability, its cowardly inertia and pathetically sincere hypocrisies, and then compared all to the life and courage and freedom of the world out of which he had drifted into its eddies. It was a gamble whether the comparison resulted in any action upon his part; heads, he'd kiss Sylvia Story and leave; tails, he'd remain and work out a new solution to the problem in that place where the arithmetic of life had so long been closed. Tails it was, and he was simply giving a vocative demonstration to the Captain of what was to him as new a train of ideas as it could possibly be to any man in Ruckers-

ville. There was once an incorrigible youth who was fitting himself for the gallows with a thoroughness often observed in the wicked and rarely seen in the good. On a certain morning some one gave him a rose. It was not the kindness which impressed him. It was the rose. He was fascinated by the charm of the flower. The creative energies of his mind were stirred. From that day till his death, during a long and harmless life, he engaged in the ambition to develop and grow more and more perfect roses. Something like this had happened to Jim Bone. He was suddenly thrilled and stirred by the determination to breathe the breath of industry, enterprise, commerce, and more animal joy into the dry bones of Ruckersville. It was miraculous, far more miraculous than an ordinary conversion, or than many miracles described under this name in the scriptures. Mr. Bone was now multiplied into at least three distinct characters: first, the man he had been, which was now fading into something merely biographical; second, the lover of Sylvia; third, the leading citizen of Ruckersville.

CHAPTER XIV

THE conversation which Bone had with Captain Martin at the quarry, taken in connection with his, by this time, obvious wealth, led to some queer incidents.

He had opened an office on the square, where he was to be found every morning consulting with his foremen, issuing orders, paying moneys, and answering a lot of flaming letter-headed mail. He was barely settled in these quarters before he discovered that every house, every foot of land, every horse, cow, and stick of timber in Rucker county was for sale. And for all of these Mr. Bone was asked an extortionate price. Captain Martin came in two days after the conversation reported in this chapter, laid his cane across the top of the financier's desk, tipped his heels up on the back of it so that they faced Bone's heels on the other side, and revealed to the said Bone that he could have the Martin mansion for his horse collar factory if he cared to pay the price. He explained that it was much more adaptable for such purposes than the church. He named an extravagant figure for the same and glared at Bone.

"Captain," said Jim, "I'll take that up with you later. Meanwhile, may I count upon your support, I mean your moral support, in this town?"

“You can!” exclaimed the Captain, jerking his heels down, clicking them together as he stood up, and offered his hand.

Mr. Bone knew the amenities of such a situation as well as if he were already candidate for Congress. He reached down, opened the little invisible side door of his desk, drew forth a bottle with an honourable seal upon it, and passed it to his guest.

On another day, not long after this, Colonel Fanning-Rucker appeared. Fanning was in a predicament, although you would never have inferred it from the appearance he made. He was impressively well groomed, and he had what women call easy manners, and what men call “slick.” This was really his trouble. He was a promoter in a territory much too small for his powers. This was how he had cramped himself and was now reduced to the necessity of attempting to unload on Mr. Jim Bone. There was a pristine simplicity about Fanning’s financial operations which caused Bone’s face to glisten with a light that Fanning mistook for being complimentary. It seems that a simple-minded old widow in Atlanta made him her agent for investing her entire fortune. Personally, I have no doubt that the fortunes of many rich men are begun with the insurance money of dead husbands that widows so naively trust to any man who tenderly offers to make an investment for them. The trouble with young Fanning was that his old widow sucker had taken a notion that she wanted some of her notes paid. He was embarrassed, temporarily, he

explained, and he was offering the whole bundle of mortgages which she had also entrusted to him, as collateral for the thousand dollars she so foolishly and persistently demanded.

He was encouraged to indulge in a frankness in explaining the situation to Mr. Bone which he was destined to regret as long as he lived. It was all perfectly legal. He had power of attorney which gave him the right to act as he saw fit in the matter. The mistake he made was in selecting Bone for such a transaction. It is a queer circumstance, but it is a fact, that a man so immoral that he is capable of seducing any woman may at the same time be so moral otherwise that he is incapable of cheating one, and that another man of almost virginal chastity will drain any widow or orphan of their last cent without a qualm of conscience. This was the psychological phenomenon illustrated by Jim Bone and Fanning-Rucker. The former could not be trusted with any pretty woman's honour, and the latter could not be trusted with her pocket book. Between the two it is easy to account for all the female tragedies in life. If we escape the one, we are always in danger of falling into the more ruthless hands of the other.

On this occasion Fanning was standing by Bone's desk with the papers spread upon it, passing an expository finger from one to the other. It seemed that he expected the old widow, who was in the last stages of paralysis, would die before she demanded the payment of another note. That was a gamble, of course, but

he took the risk, he said, smiling grimly down at Bone. At this moment the latter arose, side-stepped with much the same expression he had worn the day he dealt with the bull in Clark Story's pasture, caught Fanning by the shoulders from behind, planted the entire length of a booted foot upon the small of his back with such force and moral emphasis that the attorney shot through the open door like the flying and dishevelled figure of a young Adonis. He landed upon his knees upon the sidewalk, accompanied the next instant by the fluttering pages of his mortgages. This was a new and astonishing experience in the life of Fanning-Rucker, and the celerity of his mental activity in such a crisis was a credit to his faculties. He leaped to his feet with the gallant air of a charming man who confesses to the observer that he has stumbled, dusted the knees of his trousers delicately, gathered up his papers, and stepped briskly away in the direction of his own office without confessing the facts by feeling of the small of his back that was aching frightfully and without incriminating himself to his astonished fellow-citizens by even a glance backward at the furious figure of Jim Bone, standing in his doorway. There is one superlatively dramatic moment in the life of every scamp — the one when for the first time he recognizes himself for what he is in the eyes of another. You may infer his calibre then from the manner with which he accepts the revelation. If he resents the imputation, there is still a shallow hope of better things in him; but if he accepts

it with the quick-covering modesty of one whose nakedness has been suddenly revealed, he is incorrigible. This was the exact conduct of Fanning-Rucker. He looked up and down the street, laughed both ways so innocently that Magnis, who had seen his singular exit on one side, and Elbert White, who had observed it from the distance of Bilfire's saloon, both instantly concluded that they were mistaken in their first sensational impression.

The incident of the widow's money is closed so far as this story is concerned. I have set it down merely to indicate the temper of Mr. Bone. But it does not reveal his real policy in dealing with the citizens of Ruckersville in general, which was conciliatory and, as a rule, delightfully ingratiating, although his patience was often taxed, especially by that class of women in it who had funds of one sort or another to raise, and who, after the manner of their kind, have the philanthropic instinct highly developed, vicariously speaking. All women are natural born mendicants. Their talent for begging has been developed by their long dependence upon man, the money changer. For ten thousand years they have got what they wanted, not by earning it, but by asking for it. This does not mean that they have been idle, but their labour has been domestic, maternal, poetic rather than remunerative. No man pays his wife for her services. If he is generous, he may be extravagant in his gifts to her, and if he is stingy he may be niggardly, but there is not yet any question of the *quid pro quo* of justice between

them. She practises asking, and he practises giving — with kiss or a frown, according to his nature and circumstances. This is why every civilized community is afflicted with that artless and insistent class of successful beggars, respectable and prominent women who prance in and out of business offices or even way-lay mankind on street corners with useless “tickets” for sale at extortionate prices, with “tags” for some benevolent object which they coyly pin upon your coat collar for a dime each. The poor creatures desire to do some good in the world, and they have no income of their own above that needed for Easter and Christmas things, with which to accomplish it. Therefore they beg the necessary funds for charity from other women’s husbands and brothers and fathers. It is funny, and it is often exasperating but rarely pleasant for the victims.

Jim Bone soon discovered that Ruckersville was full of benevolences conducted by women and supported by these involuntary subscriptions. And his growing popularity in the town was largely due to the genial liberality with which he met the female demands upon him for the support of their various enterprises. The Daughters of the Confederacy, for example, took a notion that it would be “nice” to have fresh granite headstones for their soldiers’ graves when these should be made up in the new cemetery. It seemed a providential suggestion to them that Mr. Bone should furnish these from his quarry. It was Mildred Percy who waited upon him for this donation. And it was

upon this occasion that his masculine diffidence was aroused into a modest suspicion as to the state of Mildred's heart. One sultry Indian summer afternoon she appeared in his dingy office like a full-blown, dewy-lipped rose. She wore a white organdy with a narrow ribbon girdle which looked like the string that tied a fragrant bouquet. He received her in his shirt sleeves, which was a mistake she observed and forgave with the tender blue skies of her eyes as she leaned gently forward over his desk and laid the matter before him. She had come, she said, to give him the opportunity of rendering a cherished service to the community. She explained that at first there had been some "feeling" in the town about the opening of a stone quarry in such a place, the intimation being that a proper consideration would have suggested his doing it further from the sacred centre of the residence portion.

"But," replied the offender naively, "that is the one place where the granite formation lies in this section."

"I know," she answered, as if she were determined to forgive the transgression; "and we all feel better about it now since it seems quite providential that we can get our tombstones for the soldiers without sending off for them."

"Certainly!" exclaimed Bone, in a perfect agony of benevolence beneath the sweetly bending blue of her eyes. "How many will you need?"

"About fifty, I think. And you would only have the

expense of getting them out and having the names and inscriptions cut on them. I myself have promised to furnish an epitaph in verse for each."

"The hell you have!" was his inward comment; but the meanest miser alive could not have resisted the poetic tremour of Mildred's chin at this moment, nor dampened the brow of her muse with a financial consideration.

"Er—an epitaph is bound to be short, I suppose?" was the nearest he dared come to expressing his anxiety.

"Not more than three or four lines," she thought.

"You couldn't make 'em just two?" he inquired, after a rapid mental calculation of how much it would cost him to have two hundred lines of original verse cut upon granite, not including the names of the dead heroes.

"I do not feel that I could do them justice in less than four lines. You see, they were very brave!"

"That's so!" agreed Jim, as if the idea had taken hold of his convictions and impressed him deeply for the first time.

"Then we may depend upon you for the tombstones?" murmured Mildred, revealing two little pinpoint dimples in her chin and hinting with the corners of her mouth at the reward of a smile.

But with his eyes fixed narrowly upon these blandishments Jim had fallen into what is called a "brown study," and made no reply. This was embarrassing. One dimple, then the other, vanished from the surface of Mildred's chin like little stars falling from the opal

of a day-breaking sky. The corners of her mouth let go the intended smile and drooped. A mist like April rain suffused her eyes and the blue showed through like hopeless prayers.

Mr. Bone gasped, leaped to his feet, horrified at the impending danger. He was accustomed to the stormy shrieks of another kind of female, but to be the Jove that has riven such a face with the thunderbolt of tears was far from his intentions.

“Er—yes, of course, Miss Percey. You may count upon me for tombstones as long as the quarry holds out,” he exclaimed; “but the fact is, I am thinking of a few benevolences myself, and I was just wondering if you ladies will support me in mine, if I do what I can to help you.”

“Nothing will afford us greater pleasure, Mr. Bone,” she assured him, making good with a smile scalloped inside with two rows of perfectly white teeth and escorted outside with ten thousand beams from the restored brightness of her eyes.

“It’s a bargain then?”

They clasped hands facetiously, and Mildred withdrew, streaming another smile at him over her shoulder as she disappeared through the doorway.

Soon after this Bone found a card upon his desk upon which was printed certain scriptures designed to arouse and stimulate the faculty of benevolence, such as this, “The Lord loveth a cheerful giver,” “Feed my sheep,” and so forth. At length the old sheep herself appeared. As he entered the office one

morning after a short absence at the post-office he beheld Mrs. Martin seated at his desk. Her knees were far apart, her skirts spread out sitting-hen fashion, her broad black belt supported a bright steel buckle in front. She wore a shallow black hat somewhat awry upon her head, and beneath it she wore the indomitable expression of one who knows she is about to do right—and has prayed without ceasing for guidance — at your expense.

“Good morning!” said Mr. Bone.

“Good morning, Jim!” she conceded.

He went and hung up his hat, stood and dusted the lapels of his coat, flicked an atom of some white substance with his forefinger off his sleeve, did a number of artless delaying things, waiting for the issue. But Mrs. Martin sat silent, imperturbable, with her eyes fixed before her. At last she began to pat one foot, then she sighed deeply.

“What is it?” he demanded, standing in front of her with his hands in his pocket, his head bent, and his eyes searching her.

“Jim, I am here in a good cause, and I want you to pay attention to me,” she began.

“And what else?” he inquired.

“What else what?” she looked up at him.

“What else do you want me to pay besides attention?”

“Oh, I see the Lord has prepared your heart!” she exclaimed.

He did not admit it, but merely dropped his head

lower, which increased his disagreeable horned expression.

“It’s the missionary society. We are thirty dollars behind with the Bible Woman’s Fund, and not another cent can I get out of this town for it. And if we don’t pay it, our Bible women in Korea will starve to death. I have prayed over it, and I believe the Lord has directed me to come to you.”

“I’ll tell you what, Mrs. Martin. I’ll contribute the thirty dollars provided you agree to give me your support and the support of the church as far as you can influence its membership in my work in this town.”

“What is the nature of it?” she demanded, thinking this a good chance to solve the mystery which continued to surround the Bone Building.

“It’s redemptive, same as yours,” he replied.

She hesitated. Mr. Bone clamped his jaws, lifted his head, and offered to dismiss the subject with a plain gesture.

“Well, if you are sure it’s redemptive, I promise!” she consented.

“I am sure!” He grinned energetically as he sat down to write the check for her.

“Jim, are you sure you know what redemptive work is?” She held back with the feeble cautiousness of one who is torn between missionary cupidity and the desire to hold to her own definitions of salvation at any cost.

“Well, I never thought I did till I came back here,” he answered, laughing; “but now I know I know what it is. You can trust me.”

Thus he went on bribing and tying the citizens of Ruckersville, male and female, hand and heart and foot. He subscribed to their festivals, to the organ fund, to the fund Mrs. Fanning-Rucker was raising for the Colonial Dames, and even to a far-off band of King's Daughters to which Leonora Bell belonged. One of the few women who did not approach him in this sweet mendicant rôle was Sylvia Story. Either Sylvia did not care for benevolence and she belonged to none of these organizations, or she was one of those women who do not need to ask, but have only to make up their minds whether or not they will take all that men can give them upon conditions.

Still, it was a fact that Bone had advanced old Clark Story a thousand dollars upon the cobalt expectations in his cow pasture, and that in consequence of this sudden good fortune Sylvia went to Atlanta once a week that autumn, where she took vocal lessons from Berilli, the most famous teacher in the South at that time.

CHAPTER XV

THE time to write a story is after all the characters who figure in it are dead. While they still live, God holds the sequel in the hollow of His hand. You only see them going forward in it with their backs to you upon secret errands which should be included in the chronicle if you only knew what they were; or coming to meet you with enigmatical faces that baffle interpretation. An author may invent his own plot if he creates his own heroes and heroines, but if he takes them from life he is often as much in the dark as the reader is as to what the issue may be. Moreover, if the scene is laid in a village like Ruckersville all the characters that belong do not get into the scene he has laid. There is room enough for them in the life of the town, but not power enough in him to set them moving in it without jostling the others and spoiling his literary art of composition by crowding the stage of action. The Great Dramatist is the only one who is able to accomplish and give each a perfectly defined minor part. Ruckersville was a town of five hundred inhabitants, every one of whom actually played his or her rôle in this story, but you will observe less than a dozen figures here by name. For example, I have been obliged to leave out a very

prominent character in an old St. John preacher. He was the pastor of what the other Christians called the "Campbellite" church, and what he and his little hen-flock called the "Christian" church. He was even at this time the father of a man who has but recently become one of the justices of the United States Supreme bench. But to have known him at this time one would have been more likely to suppose he would become the father of a great poet or a great saint. God has a curious way of choosing the material for national characters. They do not grow as often as they might be expected to upon the hilltops of publicity. They rise mysteriously gifted from charming obscurity. This country of obscurity, by the way, is that section which really produces the greatest men. They come up in it and flourish like seeds planted in deep soil — the soil of humanity fertilized by the great simplicities of faith and virtue. This old preacher, who was so detached that he was never involved by Jim Bone's new activities, and, therefore, does not figure in this story, was really the most potential character in the town, if you considered him according to the will of God in the affairs of men. As it was, nobody considered him at all. He was very old, grizzled, nearly blind, a trifle stooped in the shoulders. On Sabbath afternoons it was his custom to read some verses of scriptures in his little church far out upon the sunny rim of Ruckersville, expound them so simply and tenderly that one might have marvelled at the contrast by which some the-

ologians confound the gospels with commentaries. (He was himself the author of two immense volumes of this character!) Then he administered the sacrament with the pleasing courtesy of a host in his Father's house which this author has never ceased to admire in spite of the fact that she belongs cheerfully and chastenedly to another denomination, where we often have to kneel and take it antiseptic fashion out of little individual medicine glasses.

I have also been obliged to omit the editor of the *Ruckersville Star*, a little mouse-coloured man who went about collecting news for his paper with the straining despair of a man squeezing blood out of a turnip. There is not a more comical or pathetic figure in any village life than this one. But I am unable to quote even an extract from one of his editorials, they were so removed from any real interest in life. And so far the doctor has been omitted. But for Agnes Yancey he would never have appeared in these pages, in spite of the fact that, next to the reigning pastor of the leading church, he exercised more influence over the women than any other man in the town. You must have observed that, while men are naturally and healthily opposed to obeying doctors' orders, so that most of them die honourably and bravely refusing to take their tonics, women are inclined to make a piety of quoting what their physician says and of yielding him an obedience that they do not know how to render the very Maker of their exaggerated beings. He is the pope of their physical

existence. He appeals to the only nerve of their courage. And they are willing to crucify themselves taking nostrums which in many cases the distracted man only prescribes to humour their distempered minds. Agnes Yancey, as you might have easily inferred from the negativity of her character, belonged to this class. She was a professional invalid only because she had missed her natural vocation in life, that of marriage. And since she is already on the scene it is inevitable that you will meet the doctor before the curtain falls.

But, as I say, there are a number of other important citizens that you may never know at all whose rôles in the drama of Ruckersville life were important. Among these was that of Austin Bourne, a young man with a coffee mill voice who had studied law in vain. He could not practise it. He had been everything in vain, from a shoe drummer to an insurance agent. He could make a success of nothing. It was due to the fact that he had this gift of a voice and believed himself too temperamental to endure the revolting details of earning a livelihood in a sordid world. His voice was him. He subjugated every feeling and every obligation to this fact. Therefore, while you may never meet him in these pages, you will bear in mind that there was never an evening when his squalling bass did not rattle the casements of some one of the Ruckersville mansions. And it would always be accompanied by the tremulous feminine reed treble of an organ, manipulated either by . . .

maiden or another. The queer thing was that he had never married any one of his accompanists. But the explanation was really simple. He was already wedded to his voice. Besides, if he had married Leonora Bell, for example (not that Leonora would have had him!), he would have been deprived of the pleasure of having Mildred Percy to accompany him on his organ in her parlour. A man with a voice is an innocent sort of instrumental polygamist. He cannot endure the same organist for a lifetime.

On Sunday afternoons in particular the town indulged in a kind of sacred concert. The words and tunes of many hymns ascended and descended in the great Sabbath calm, and often with a predominant treble poignancy which suggested that they were passing along with the camel and with many vocal squeezings through the very eye of the needle. But always, somewhere in the thin streaming sound, could be heard an awful bass.

On the Sabbath evening of which I am now about to write Jim Bone and Bimber were taking their way leisurely along Elbert avenue. Through the open window of the Misses Yancey's parlour could be plainly seen the figures of the two sisters standing on either side of Leonora Bell, who was seated at the organ with her fingers spread out over the keys. They were singing "Abide With Me"; while from the parlour of Mildred Percy rolled a tremendous and familiar bass. The singer was struggling with "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep" in a manner sufficiently

realistic to produce seasickness. As the two pedestrians came opposite the gate of the Percey residence and the surging waves of the song rolled over them, the dog sat down, laid his tail out in the dust behind him, dropped his ears mournfully, lifted his nose, opened his mouth and exhaled an antiphony howl that was long and excruciating. Caruso himself has not more temperament than a hound when it comes to singing; and Bimber was so worked upon by the combination of the organ and the voice within that nature compelled him to join in the chorus. Nothing could have been more sympathetic than his intentions, but the effect was to silence the music as suddenly as if the singer had been dashed to death in the waves of his own melody. The dog at once resumed his walk, tail erect, ears cheerfully pointed. This was the view he presented to the two outraged faces that instantly appeared in Mildred Percey's parlour window. Bone himself was seen to stagger. To all appearances he was drunk. As a matter of fact, he was laughing. Whenever he was sufficiently inebriated by the application of his sense of humour to a situation, he weakened, lost physical control of his muscles and fell out of his chair, if he was sitting, or staggered if he was walking.

This incident of the usual Sabbath recital in Ruckersville has no particular bearing upon our story. I merely set it down as an illustration of the innumerable details which may define the life of a community but which are necessarily left out of fiction and history,

thereby rendering both everlastingly less veracious than life.

As Jim proceeded along from the shadow of one great tree to another, which alternated with intense patches of sunlight upon the sidewalk, he saw Amy White advancing unconsciously to meet him. She wore an old rumped and wrinkled muslin populated with faded pink roses. It was made with a "peroda" waist, and the full skirt rippled in the breeze about her tall, thin figure. She was bareheaded, and she bent a trifle forward, tapping with a cane upon the walk, locating herself at every step with that singular, touching dexterity of the blind. He had passed the house a number of times within the last few months and always saw her seated at the window. But some masculine horror of invading the tragedy of such a presence had prevented his going in and making himself known to her, and thus renewing an old and intimate relation. For, when he was an urchin, years before, he had been in Amy's Sunday-school class. It was as if he were unwilling to break the seal of an old affection, which had amounted at the time to one of those comradeships so frequent between a patient, elderly woman and a very restless, outcast little boy. His parents had not been of the old Cavalier stock, and even in the Sunday-school class he had been a sort of Ishmael brand snatched from the burning of his little sins. It was during this period that Amy's sight began to fail, a frightful miracle that the child watched with the

It was his cruel custom to test her from time to time in those days by standing up before her in the doorway of her house, a vagrant, red-headed, thin-faced lad in baggy short breeches, and demand:

“Can you see me yet, Miss Amy?”

Each time he was obliged to draw a trifle nearer before the straining eyes could define him like a darker shadow amid the gathering of all shadows.

The day came when she no longer saw him even in the bright sunlight. He remembered the morning well. The peach blossoms were out in the orchard behind the house, the old lilac beside the chimney was covered with purple plumes. A hundred jonquils stood in rows along the path to her door. And a March wind was blowing out of a clear sky. She was seated upon the steps — changed, silent, with closed lids. The struggle was over; she had yielded to the darkness at last. He missed the strained, sweet look with which she had so many times greeted him, always ambitious to proclaim that she could yet make out the colour of that flaming head.

He hastened to station himself before her in the glare of the sun.

“Miss Amy, look and see if you can see me now!” he cried.

“No, Jimmy,” she replied softly; “I don’t really believe I’ve seen you for ever so long. What I see is not you, but merely a deeper darkness in that spot.”

He recalled the propriety of his grief, and wondered now at the delicacy of the boy he had been, who had

laid the branch of fragrant lilacs in her lap as if there were nothing remarkable about going blind, thus artlessly concealing the shock and horror of his mind from her.

All these recollections passed with incredible swiftness through his thoughts as he now watched Amy advancing, unhurried, serene, tapping the pavement to right and left, unchanged by the years that had flown since their comradeship. Her face shone in the sun, supernal, ageless. He hesitated, was tempted to cross the street and avoid the meeting. When you are a certain kind of man you do not like to be translated and transfigured back into the little boy you have been by the greeting of one who has not seen you since. It makes a contrast, wrenches the moral coward in you, which is painful.

At this moment Amy paused, waved her cane vaguely as if in search of him.

"Who is it?" she demanded in that curious sotto voce. "I don't believe I recognize you."

There was scarcely a man, woman, or child in Ruckersville that she did not know always before they reached her. But at the distance of three yards she now recognized a stranger.

"Miss Amy ——"

"Jimmy! It's Jimmy Bone!" she exclaimed, with the quick transfiguration of her face from the masked silence of the blind into a smile which rendered it effulgent.

Jim made a stride that brought him within reach.

She dropped her cane, lifted first one hand, then the other, touched the stubble on his cheek, made sure of the cleft in his chin with a widening smile of recognition, as if she had located a familiar mark.

"Do you know, boy," she went on, measuring him with the quick, delicate precision of the blind, "I believe yours was the last face I ever really saw? Do you remember how your red hair was the last to fail me? I could see that long after your face had become just a blur!

"But it's your nose I remember best," she laughed, as she lifted an exploring finger once more and ran it along the Sierra ridges of this organ. "As a child, Jimmy, you were cursed with a nose of a cynical maturity that was out of all keeping with your tender years."

Thus it was that she came to the tear that lay upon his cheek.

"It's not your being blind, Miss Amy; it's your cheerfulness," he exclaimed hoarsely, brushing it away with the back of his hand.

She omitted the point. She was really incapable of grasping it. They walked along together, he holding her arm and guiding her.

"I am so glad to see you!" she went on.

"I believe you do!"

"Do what?"

"See me. It's the first time since I came back that I have felt that anybody actually saw me! I've a little chicken's roosting feelings, Miss Amy, as if it had just been one long, long day since I was here

with you, and I'd spent the whole of it looking for doodles in the grass, and was now getting back mighty cross and tired, to the coop at sundown. Haven't you got a few bread crumbs for me in the old pan you used to keep on the water-bucket shelf in the back porch?"

"I had to give up my chickens, Jimmy. It was a great cross at the time. But I got to where I could not find all the little ones in the evening, and I'd be awakened sometimes at night hearing one cheeping, cheeping somewhere out in the dark. And I'd hate to disturb Elbert. He works so hard every day, it seemed unreasonable to make him get up out of sound sleep to put just a little chicken in the coop under its mother's wings. So I let the hen go."

They sat down in the entry of Amy's house and talked. That is, Jim talked. It was the first time that he had willingly given out any of the details of his "past" in Ruckersville. But now all at once it seemed that he had an overwhelming desire to get it properly expurgated and set forth to Amy's admiring ears. It was no more the truth than any other man's "past" is the truth that he tells to a woman. She inspired him to lie about it beautifully, as she inspired Elbert to lie about his daily existence, and as every good woman inspires every bad man to fabricate his autobiography. As he went on with the tale of his adventures he began to see himself sweetly glorified in the placid, smiling attention of her sweet, blind face. He wondered why in the world he had been so

secretive about those years in the West. He perceived all at once that he was not the rowdy he had supposed himself to be, but something of a hero of the chapter-heading smiles upon Amy's lips. Given the tablet of such a countenance, and the worst man in existence can make shining scriptures of an ill-spent life. The truth is, we are all autobiographical liars. But the funny thing is that once we see ourselves clarified by such faith as Amy's, we accept her version, and experience a shriven peace that must distract the God who makes our moral sense but does not control it afterward. On this occasion Bone finished his metamorphosis from the outlaw into the modest, deprecating hero simply by a method of narrative which left out the undesirable portions of his real history. And it is one of the commonest miracles of conversion practised by either men or women.

Two slim poplars, that stood on either side of the front gate to Captain Martin's residence, across the street, cast long steeple shadows upon the floor of the entry of Amy's house before Jim had finished his story. Then there was a little silence. Amy sat with her hands peacefully folded, showing like long-fingered lilies among the roses in her gown. Jim looked up like a man who is resting after a prodigious creation, and saw her face hooded in the evening shade, serene like a prayer that was answered years and years ago. For the first time he really thought of her. During the past hour she had simply been the environment in which he had found it possible and

natural to recreate himself in the image of strength and nobility. Now he was inclined to part the silence that hung like a curtain before that marvellous countenance with a question:

“But what of you, Miss Amy? You haven’t told me a thing about yourself.”

‘Oh, I’ve been singularly blest, Jimmy,’ she said, covering him for a moment with the halo of her smile. “You might not think it, me being blind. But I’ve missed all the sad sights in the world for more than twenty years. At first I was lonely. You know Elbert is a very busy man. His practice keeps him up town all day. But I reckon I’m gladder to see him when he comes in the evening than most women are who are busy all day and do not spend the whole of it waiting for their husbands. It seems to me that I don’t really live till I hear Elbert’s footsteps out there on the walk in the evening. Then all at once, in the twinkling of a star, my heart begins to bubble, I am alive, I laugh and I talk. It’s funny. You’d think that Elbert would do most of the talking, him being out in sight of so much doings in the town all day, but really I always have the most to say. You’d be astonished how much news of life you get just sitting blind and still for so many hours every day. Elbert says I am the greatest sensationalist in Ruckersville. I’m always telling him things I’ve thought out about this one or that one during the day. Most of ’em good things, I hope, Jimmy,” she interrupted herself to add. “It’s wonderful how

kind not seeing makes all your knowledge of men and women. And of course it's Elbert's way of complimenting me," she laughed. "He says it would make him terrible uneasy to have such a long-sighted woman for a wife if he didn't behave himself; says he'd never dare come into my presence if he didn't do his best all the time. He says he knows that the Lord sometimes holds his hands before his face when He's planning his new salvations for man to keep me from taking advantage of it a thousand years too soon."

Jim was unable to join in her punctuations of laughter. He was thinking of Elbert, the vagabond and sot, and marvelling at this sweet miracle of blindness which was better than sight. He was suddenly overtaken by a stinging self-consciousness. It seemed that he, as well as Elbert, were reincarnations achieved by Amy's faith which bore no resemblance to the men they really were. It was depressing. The polluted past streamed in again upon his memories of himself. He arose, shook one trouser leg down, then the other, and said:

"Well, I must be going."

"Come again, Jimmy," she invited. "I want to know what you are doing in the town. Everybody is talking about you."

"They are?"

"Yes," she laughed; "I hear all sorts of rumours about the Bone Building on the square, and Mildred tells me you are going to furnish tombstones for the soldiers' graves out of your new quarry."

"She did?"

"Yes, and that shows the people you mean well. They are very glad now that you have come back."

"Hope they'll stay glad!"

"Of course they will. And you must come back again and tell me things. I'd like to hear."

She paused, smiled a smile so luminous that it might have bridged any darkness, and went on.

"I'll tell you a secret, Jimmy, that I've told no one else. I am writing a little Book of Life. Elbert copies it out for me in the evenings. It is about people in Ruckersville. Nothing wise or great. I am just setting down the things they do, the commonplace ones that never get into history or fiction. It's not to be published, of course; just a sort of human calendar of the days of our years here in the old town, which the children who come after us may discover some day in mine and Elbert's things after we are dead and gone, and that they may find interesting and profitable. I've set it down already, all this life you've stirred up, and the talk about that strange Bone Building on the square. It's getting to be like a real story, my little book, since you've come, a story with a mystery in it, a mystery upon which you have got us all working, without telling what it is we are doing. You have no idea what a difference it's made, your coming and your stirring up things. Sitting here by the window in my house, I've felt these last few months like a thermometer with my mercury rising."

“You say Elbert copies it for you?” inquired Jim, who had listened with singular intentness to her artless confession. He had seen chapters of “The Town Testament” in the *Monthly Mercury*, and had wondered, like every one else, what cross between saint and fiend was the author of these papers. He was still standing with his back to the street, poised in mid-air of astonishment, so to speak, at the discovery he had made, when another shadow fell between those of the two poplars on the floor. The shadow moved, lengthened, tilted its hat, swished its skirts, and showed for an instant the neck and chin of a charming profile.

He turned and beheld Sylvia Story setting her foot upon the doorstep, looking more than ever like a Corinthian virgin in the calm of the Sabbath evening.

“Sylvia!” called Amy at once. “Come here, child, and let me see you!” By seeing, she meant touching. “I always know you by the rustle of your skirts,” she laughed, lifting her hand and passing it delicately along the girl’s shoulders and neck as she bent and kissed her.

“Jimmy, you know Sylvia, don’t you?” she went on.

It was a fact that they knew and did not know each other with an intimacy which enthralled imagination, but as the young man looked into the girl’s face he understood that he should make a great mistake if he admitted this fact.

“No; never saw Miss Story before!” answered Jim, conjugating the lie glibly.

"I make you acquainted then," she said sedately. "This is Jimmy Bone, Sylvia. I used to know him when he was a boy. And this is Sylvia Story, Jimmy, the girl that's taken your place to me since you went away."

Jim flattened his hat against his side with one hand, set one leg forward, bent his knee and bowed awkwardly, but low enough to show the entire top of his red head. Sylvia merely inclined hers.

"My God!" thought Jim, "am I never to hear her voice!"

"Sit down, Sylvia!" Amy commanded. Then the young sphinx yielded the point.

"No, thank you. I am on my way to choir practice. I only stopped for a moment."

How terrible it is that no mortal grace has yet produced a language worthy of the tongue of a beautiful woman. If Sylvia had parted her lips and spoken in the Ossian strain of Torcah-tarno's daughter, Jim would have been startled only by the fitness of the speech. As it was, the commonplace familiarity of the sentiment she expressed took nothing from the deep, resonant tones coming out of her throat in a cadence that would have charmed any words into the semblance of poetry.

A moment later each had taken leave of Amy, and were walking along the dusky street together.

It is not my purpose to follow them. The language of true love is monosyllabic and symbolic.

If a lover says to his beloved, "It is a beautiful night,"

he does not really refer to the diurnal phenomena of darkness in which distant suns and moons and planets shine. These are minor constellations bedimmed when compared with her eyes. What he really means is that her presence makes the night beautiful.

She understands, and says nothing. To reply "yes" would indicate egotism or dulness. Nothing, from the standpoint of an ignoble eavesdropper, can be more inane or absurd than a conversation between lovers. And no speech in this world is so pregnant with supernal meaning. This is why it is nearly always profanation to quote lovers, and explains why the conversation of Sylvia and Jim as they took their way down the avenue is not set down here. If it is as great a relief to the reader as it is to the author that they have at last met upon grounds sufficiently conventional to permit their courtship to proceed in a proper manner, this is gratification enough, without your knowing the only sentences that passed between them during the walk from Amy's house to the church. A real lover does not beat much about the bush. He makes every word tell till his arms render further conversation unnecessary. Mr. Bone, I say, addressed Sylvia only once during this walk. But this remark, whatever it was, printed the entire anthology of the rose family upon her face from brow to neck. She left him at the door of the church, turned her back upon him in the twilight outside, took her way down the aisle, perfectly indignant and perfectly happy.

CHAPTER XVI

BY THE first of October the walls of the Bone Building were complete and the roof was on. It was built of stone, and had the appearance of an ancient horned owl in front. This astonishing effect was secured by two stubby square towers that rose up on each side of the wide entrance, which dropped back the width of the towers and which opened with arched double doors upon the mysterious interior. The back of the building bellied out like those Baptist churches where the baptismal pool is let in under the pulpit. It might easily have been taken for a church by the simple-minded people of the town but for the fact that no house of God could have had that peculiarly sinister horned expression in front. Another queer feature was the half-moon stained-glass windows, put in a yard above the tallest man's head, and so turned upon their hinges as to afford light and ventilation within, but no possible chance of observation from the outside.

"It's no church!" commented Elbert White late one afternoon as, advancing, between the Captain and Clark Story, the three paused upon the sidewalk to study these same windows.

"It's got two steeples," said Story by way of rebuttal.

"That's it," remarked the Captain. "A church ain't entitled to but one."

"And there's a carload of benches at the freight depot, shipped to Jim Bone. Seen 'em myself to-day; and if they ain't church pews I don't know one when I see it."

"Still," persisted Elbert, leaning heavily upon his friends and squinting with a drunken wag of his upturned head at the windows, "no church rolls its eyeballs that high up under its eaves! That's one thing — hic — 'at you can always say for a church. Its doctrines may be so devious that its goshpel tends more to salivate 'an it does to shave, but the theology of its windows is so near an' clear 'at a way-farin' man though a fool can always look in and see ever'thing 'at's to be scheen!"

He drew one arm from around the Captain's neck, worked his face into a drunken maggot smile, let out a puling laugh, pointed shakily at the high eyebrows of the Bone Building, and concluded:

"It may be a mosque, or a harem, or 'n ice-cream parlour, but I'll be danged if it's a church!"

They moved on, Elbert dragging his feet, swaying tenderly this way and that between his friends. One of those circumstances had transpired which drew them closer together than usual in the recognition of a common fate. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker was giving a lawn festival that afternoon for the United Daugh-

ters of the Confederacy fund, the fund to be used to pay the expenses of moving the ashes of the Confederate heroes from the old cemetery to the new one. And while a festival was in the nature of a public entertainment, Mrs. Rucker always stood for exclusiveness, and would choose her guests even when they paid for their refreshments. And, in spite of the war record of the three old vagabonds, they were not invited. It was the way she had of expressing her contempt of the Captain's stinginess with his bee-swarms in the spring, and her social aversion to vagabonds in the case of the other two. Vagabonds are, as individuals, usually far more interesting than a better respected person, but one does not recognize them socially. As a matter of fact, the three old cronies would not have come if she had asked them, but not having the coveted opportunity to refuse depressed them and afforded the much more to be desired excuse for consoling themselves in Bilfire's saloon. They drank, therefore, and then promenaded the almost deserted streets arm in arm, laying the palsied finger of their poor old muddled wits upon everything which attracted their attention.

These lawn festivals given by Mrs. Fanning-Rucker were as much in the year's calendar as Washington's Birthday and Decoration Day. One occurred in the spring, the other in early autumn. And they served a twofold purpose: the first, to replenish the treasury of the D.A.R., the other to replenish that of the U.D.C.'s; but chiefly these were the semi-annual

occasions when she chose to separate the sheep from the goats, socially, in Ruckersville. And it was always a lawn festival, because she laboured under some affectation of English customs, where the great ones invite people to take refreshments in their parks and on their lawns whom they could not entertain at their infinitely more exclusive dinner tables. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker chose these guests almost entirely from the neighbouring city of Atlanta. The society of Ruckersville never reached farther than the shade cast by her front veranda upon the lawn. If you wish to know exactly what persons social megalomaniacs consider in their set note those they invite to dine with them. These consist of other megalomaniacs like themselves, a few poor bewitched creatures who know how to barter compliments for social favours, and "lions" of one sort and another. Any stranger at such a table may easily recognize the three classes. If the young man seated next to you makes extravagant efforts to be agreeable, you may know that he is one of the poor creatures. The megalomaniacs are to be recognized by the fact that they do not exert themselves at all to be agreeable. They show their natural dispositions as plainly as the bristles on a hog's back. Usually there is not more than one "lion" at a properly arranged dinner party. This is upon the theory that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time; two planets cannot revolve in the same orbit. Two "lions" at meat in the same cage have been known to create a scene by tearing each other's mane in an

argument. A lion may eat with his knife and still be welcomed in the circle, not because he is of it, you understand, but because he is "so interesting," don't you know. He is the freak which they examine between courses.

Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's festival could have no place here but for the fact that Jim Bone had progressed so far in the scale of things that he became the "lion" of it. And he sustained the rôle with a ripping sincerity which thrilled and delighted his hostess, and which bade fair to win him a place at her very dinner table. You may permit the celebrity within your gates to insult you upon the same amiable principle that the king's fool employed the impotent privilege of speaking the most offensive truth to his royal master.

Young Fanning-Rucker had strenuously opposed his mother's determination to include Jim Bone on her guest list for this occasion. He was not in a position to go into the particulars of his objection, not the least of which was a large boot-sole shaped bruise in the small of his back. He refused to admit even to himself the annoyance he had experienced frequently of late at seeing him accompanying Sylvia to and from Amy White's house and escorting her to church.

"I tell you, mother, he is a brute," he exclaimed with some heat when he discovered her intention.

"We are all brutes, Fanning, at bottom," said the old horse-faced cynic, flattening her wide nostrils

with an ugly smile, as she poured her son's breakfast coffee. "I have sometimes suspected that I smelt a little weasel smell about you. You make money so easily, my dear Fanning. It is another way of being a brute."

Her son blushed. There was no love lost between them. There never is between an unscrupulous mother and an unscrupulous son. The women who command the ever-strengthening affection of their male offspring are usually of a negative maternal pallor, as impotent as picture cards for influencing the lives of their sons, but cherished on this account with a sentimentality that has nothing to forgive.

"And he is really an outlaw," Fanning went on after a self-subjugating pause.

"I can imagine nothing more delightful than a real live outlaw at a lawn party," she retorted. "Besides," she went on seriously, "he is to-day the most prominent man in this town and county. And to leave him out would be like leaving out the central figure of a picture."

"Don't expect me to be civil to him," exclaimed Fanning, in a perspiration of mortified pride.

"He'll never miss it, your civility, Fanning; it is too silky for a man, anyhow. Bone will get most of his courtesies from the women. He's the kind of man women grow crazy about."

"I can't see why," said Fanning contemptuously.

"That is because you have the limiting sex of a man. But somehow you have missed the masculine

keyboard in the development of your character. You, Fanning, are destined as long as you live to court women for what Bone can have of them without even asking for it. It's the rough, elemental difference between being just a patent-leather-tipped gentleman and being a man so profoundly male as to have the shadow of the cave-man still in his eye. All women are savages at bottom, the primmest little old maid, with her thin, pitifully chastened countenance, no less than the most reckless. And they every one recognize in this ugly booted monster their natural mate."

"You forget yourself and other women of refinement."

"We have our refinements about vice, drunkenness, dulness, table manners, shirt bosoms, and so forth, but we have no capacity for refinement which would prevent our choosing such a man just for himself, in preference to any other."

If you want to get the unvarnished truth about women that no good woman knows, set an old Schopenhauer frump like Mrs. Fanning-Rucker to trailing them with her beetle tongue.

The curious thing is that such a woman could fly into the grinning face of her own cynicism with pretensions that made her ridiculous and that did little credit to her wit. This was illustrated by a conversation between her and Jim Bone on the afternoon in question.

A party on Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's lawn was like

an expurgated picnic. The trees and grass attended. There were the same little summer clouds overhead which always threaten showers upon such occasions, but the people were not all there, and they were different, too old, too sedate. As Jim Bone advanced up the avenue toward the open gateway of the lawn he pushed his hat far back upon his head and looked over at the groups seated here and there in the shade. He thought they had the appearance of a Sabbath school class that had grown stout and aged without ever getting out of the primer catechism. They sat so primly, as if they were still expecting the question:

“Who made you?”

And were prepared to answer as usual:

“God!”

“Who was the first man?”

“Adam!”

“Who was the first woman?”

“Eve!”—all in the chorus of children whose voices had changed into the guttural tones of age.

The women predominated. Only a few men stood herded in a little group near the gate, each with one leg set forward, each chewing a quid of tobacco, and occasionally sneaking his head as far over his shoulder as possible in order to spit behind him, the ladies being in front. Colonel Lark, who wore a red tie and his hat in his hand, appeared to be monopolizing the conversation. He was really prancing a little like a fat old dock-tailed cob, thus indicating that he

was conscious of the distant female grand stand. The other men stood stolidly hipshod so as to speak, with that deceptive listlessness which the married male so often shows in mixed company if his wife is present, and to which no married female would give in to, no matter if it were possible to have half a dozen husbands present.

Aside from the row of elderly women already referred to, who held the catechism stare as they sat side by side in the shade of the veranda, Bone observed that most of the women present were gathered about a thin feminine wraith who reclined in a wicker chair which was tilted far back upon the very heels of its rockers. This was Agnes Yancey. From being the least renowned member of Ruckersville society she had suddenly become the most conspicuous woman in it. It was known far and wide that she was about to have an "operation." This was positively her last appearance before that event. Her head rested upon a pillow on the back of the chair with that wilted insecurity sometimes observed in a fowl afflicted with the disease known as the "limber neck." The folds of her white skirt hung to her beseechingly. It is queer when you think about it, how the mind of a woman controls the set of her clothes. Many of them are destined to join that company of redeemed spirits whose feathers forever trail in the dust. Agnes, who had never enjoyed any particular distinction in the style of her gowns till this summer, during which she had at last yielded to the call of invalidism, now

wore gowns that were as symbolic of backache and hysteria as Sylvia Story's were of health and passion and beauty. They laved her limbs like tears.

Jim, who feared a sick woman as he could not have feared a raging hyena, paused in the gateway. He was dressed "within an inch of his life," as the saying went in Ruckersville, which means that he had got the tops of his boots inside his trousers and that the latter swelled out accordingly. Their colour was a light greenish-gray and the effect produced by his legs, therefore, was of two huge stalks of celery that had wilted halfway up to where the skirt of his black Prince Albert coat reached and concealed them. As a matter of fact, he wore no vest, the weather still being in his opinion too warm to warrant this extra garment. He wore a white shirt, and a green puffed tie around his "standing collar," the points of which teased his chin on either side. He was shaved until his cheeks gave the impression of having received a red hardwood finish, and, while a haberdasher might have questioned his style, no one could have questioned his effect. It was that of a moose disguised in green breeches and a frock coat, looking for a mate. And if he had used the retina of a woman's eye for a mirror he could not in his artlessness have produced a more thrilling effect upon the heart. The truth was that he had learned from Sylvia that she was herself to take some mysterious part at this festival, and he had togged himself accordingly. Sylvia did not tell him that never before had the social sheriff of Ruckers-

ville honoured her with an invitation, and she was very far from understanding that she owed it to his attentions. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker had no objection to the girl provided she did not rebut and marry her son. And since the rumour of Bone's attentions had reached her, she took this method of helping along their convenient courtship.

Still Jim hesitated in the gateway. The sight of Agnes with the women fluttering about her disconcerted him. He saw Mildred Percey seated beneath a tent "fly" behind a highly decorated table, from which she was selling "refreshments," and near by was the tent itself with the flaps of it discreetly buttoned together, but he could catch no glimpse of Sylvia. He was about to walk back as far as Amy's house and return with her when Mrs. Fanning-Rucker detached herself from the circle around Agnes's chair, waved her hand invitingly, and advanced to meet him.

"Oh, Mr. Bone, at last we have captured you!" she said by way of greeting.

Jim said nothing. He was not a lady's man, merely always the lover of some woman.

He literally "shook" hands, which amused his hostess. She thought it was so simple. As a matter of fact it was an involuntary expression of ferocious impatience. His one thought was "Where is Sylvia?" and it was with difficulty that he restrained himself from demanding his information.

"Here you have been in the town for nearly four months, turning it upside down, and this is the first

time the ladies have had the chance to meet you," she went on, smiling at him.

"You forget Sylvia," he thought, but held his tongue. The fact is, he had his fore legs planted and was laying back upon his hind legs, by the expression of his countenance, like a balking mule. He refused to understand that she was trying to lead him forward.

"You see nearly everybody is already here, and I want to introduce you."

"All but Sylvia," he strummed upon his indignant heartstrings. He could feel Mrs. Fanning-Rucker clucking to him, psychically speaking, and pulling at his bridle. Really she was amused. He had not spoken at all, but he was sweating copiously, and she supposed he was embarrassed.

"Of course, not everybody is here. I always reserve the right to be exclusive."

She designed this for a compliment. She dashed it into his face as if she was administering a restorative to a fainting person. It did attract his attention. He looked at her vaguely and wondered what she had said.

"One has to be, don't you think?" she added with the air of rubbing his back and patting his flanks.

"Be?" he murmured in his deep, raucous voice.

"Yes. I say one has to be exclusive."

Jim looked at her. He had not forgotten Sylvia. He resolved, so help him God, never to forgive it if he had been deceived into coming there except to see Sylvia. But, throwing one arm around that thought

to preserve it, with the other he shot a blow into the face of Mrs. Fanning-Rucker, figuratively speaking, of course, which gave her that impression of his ripping sincerity already referred to.

"It's owing entirely to who you are and how steady you can stand on your own pegs," he answered, looking at her with cool precision.

"Delicious!" she gasped, while she managed her smile with the dexterity of an old duellist who receives his opponent's blade upon his own with a clash.

At this moment the flaps of the tent were folded back and the figure of a girl dressed as a gypsy appeared in the opening.

The effect upon Bone was instantaneous and miraculous. If he had fallen upon his knees and kissed her hand Mrs. Fanning-Rucker could not have been more surprised than she was at the sudden metamorphosis of a boor into a barbarian gallant. He fairly cuddled under her wings as they now moved together across the grass. And nothing could have surpassed the wit and good humour with which Mr. Bone conducted himself for the next hour, during which time he met and squeezed the hand of every woman, old and young, upon the lawn. He took a short promenade of his own accord with Leonora Bell, who wanted to tell him how much she admired the architecture of his new building. He had not thought of this feature of it before, and professed himself so deeply grateful to her that the poor little old maid felt as if she had got a hypodermic of strange vitality as she

crimped along beside him. He permitted himself to be drawn away by Mary Yancey in a confidential moment during which he promised to "use his influence" with Colonel Lark in the interest of certain civic improvements. He showed a tender consideration for Agnes by fanning her with his hat brim after she had endured the shock of being introduced to him. She parted her lips, drew her lids down till they showed only a three-cornered angle of each sad pupil, and could not resist confiding her ailment to him.

"It's my spine. The doctor says it isn't, but I know it is!" she murmured faintly.

He redoubled his efforts with the hat brim and looked distractedly for Tony, as a desperate man looks for some one to rescue him from a frightful danger or a hideous embarrassment. Mr. Adams was nowhere in sight.

"Did you ever have any trouble with your spine, Mr. Bone?" inquired the invalid. She had reached that stage of neurasthenia when a woman centres her whole mind upon her innocent vertebrae.

"Never!" he answered, turning furiously red as if her question had stripped him stark naked in the presence of the company.

A look of deep disappointment passed over her face, as much as to say that again she had asked for sympathy and received a stone. She closed her eyes. He withdrew gently at this dismissal, and trod backward upon the trail of Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's lavender

coloured organdie. Apparently she would forgive this only on condition that he would sit down beside her upon a neighbouring bench and listen to her account of the needs of the U.D.C.'s. Leaning forward with the expression of a man who would infinitely prefer being upon his knees before her, he listened. And his hostess made a mental note to the effect that he was willing to pay well for her favours when five minutes later he explained that he had for some time coveted this opportunity to make his contribution to the cause represented by these noble women. He said he would mail it to her the next day. For some minutes he had seen Mildred Percey signalling to him from behind the refreshment table, by waving a sheet of note-paper. He understood. It was her triumphant way of letting him know that she had finished another epitaph for the tombstones to the Confederate heroes. Nearly every day now she appeared in his office with two or three of these thin, bugling verses. And even more than he feared Agnes's invalidism did he fear Mildred's poetic inspirations. He was beginning to understand them with all the horror a man has when, in love with one woman, he feels the sentimental tentacles of another closing about him. He thought rapidly with that double action of the mind which is peculiar to any person in a difficulty. He was resolved upon two things: first, not to approach with any one else the tent where Sylvia was obviously engaged in telling fortunes; second, not to come near the refreshments over which Mildred presided without

an adequate guard. This was more difficult to achieve than it seemed, for the tent was the centre of much pleasant excitement. From the tail of his eye he had observed Fanning-Rucker conducting a constant stream of guests in that direction. But Mildred's table was far less popular. He was suddenly blessed with an inspiration, so evasive, so effective, that it would have done credit to a much more socially experienced person.

"Let's all have something!" he exclaimed to his hostess, sweeping an arm out that took in the various groups of guests scattered here and there, and wagging his head significantly at the "refreshments."

The saloon vernacular of his invitation did not escape the lady to whom it was addressed. She was amused, and delighted at the opportunity to swell the receipts for the U.D.C. fund.

She arose, conducting him here and there from one patch of guests to another, even as far as the row of old peony saints seated in the shade of the veranda.

"Come on, everybody! Mr. Bone is going to treat."

A few minutes later they moved across the lawn in the direction of Mildred's table, Bone stepping along a trifle in advance. He was like the nucleus of a comet dragging its tail of fluttering, chattering femininity upon the ground. His voice rose, he guffawed, he whipped out compliments right and left so grossly masculine that they surpassed mere flattery. By the time they reached the table with its punch bowl of lemonade, its platters of cakes, and decorations of

candy boxes, he had "arrived" in Ruckersville, femininely speaking.

It was his purpose to drain the bowl and clear the table of everything except the epitaph. This was the first time the ladies of Ruckersville had ever experienced the thrill of being treated to more than one plate of ice cream from any man. They were not hungry, but they enjoyed the excitement of being the beneficiaries of masculine extravagance, which women are always glad to interpret as complimentary to themselves. The contagion of the gluttonous merriment they created was irresistible, and they were presently joined by the group of men who had till now held economically aloof. Colonel Lark engaged in a mild competition with Mr. Bone by presenting the ladies with the remaining box of candy. No one noticed that every time he took another glass of lemonade Jim invariably and instinctively felt with his booted toes for the foot rail which is fastened along the bottom of every bar, although he caught Mrs. Martin's eye fixed upon him severely and intelligently once when he held his glass up to the light and looked through it from force of habit before drinking.

Only a detective, or one of our new practising psychologists, could have told that he had been making desperate but futile efforts to escape for some time, when Tony Adams appeared in the gateway. These efforts became almost frantic when he discovered that he could not outwit the tender thanking intimacy of Mildred's blue eyes. She had

incident as his personal attention to herself. As Tony sauntered leisurely across the lawn, his eye fixed with amused astonishment upon Bone cavorting so noisily in the midst of so many women, he stopped; his face suddenly sobered. Then he started forward again with hasty strides, like a man who has received an inspiration order to hurry. The fact is that over the bobbing, beflowered garden hats of his captors Mr. Bone had sent his friend the "high sign" of distress.

"Tony," he whispered hoarsely as he met that worthy in front of the hedge behind Mildred's table, "corral these old heifers and hold 'em if you have to lasso every one of 'em till I get away!"

He disappeared instantly and completely from view. The hedge extended as far as the tent and completely concealed his flight.

CHAPTER XVII

SYLVIA was seated at a small table in the middle of the tent. Opposite her, on the other side of the table, was a vacant chair. She wore a flaming red gown, tightened beneath her bust with a broad girdle of gold-coloured tinsel. The ends of it hung down heavily and indicated the slenderness of her figure. Her bright hair was concealed beneath a wig of long raven-black locks. And the queer thing was one perceived at once that this dark crown was the logical setting for her features. It revealed that ancient fierceness of the aboriginal feminine with which she was so well endowed and which her yellow braids had always concealed. In the beginning all women had black hair. The blond shade so many of them retain now is a sort of disguise they have developed by prayer and by the practice of light-coloured innocency. But you can never know the real nature of any woman until you have examined her features in their native shade of dark hair. Blue eyes and the fairest skin will make confession there of traits never suspected so long as they were haloed in corn-tassel curls.

To see Sylvia now was to behold a revelation. Her face was a gem, human, blood-illuminated, but

crystal cold. The heart of such a woman is the crucible of a beautiful baby, but that is its purpose. It sustains her, not you. She can no more open it to the tender fires of love than a ruby can bleed. She is a thing to possess, to keep, to hold, to have and to love, but that is her desire and her limit. She is so made that she cannot love in return. Therefore, she is the remaining, everlasting, untrodden frontier toward which all lovers strive in vain.

But the fact that she could not love did not mean that she could not flame high with an anger that amounted to rage when deprived of her mastering passion to excite love in another. She sat now like a slender, red-lipped, furious-eyed conflagration, her elbows resting upon the table and her chin in her two hands folded under it, with the fingers pressed hard into the glowing cheek on either side. She was thinking of this, that every man and every woman on the lawn had been into the tent to have their fortunes told except Jim Bone. She was making up her mind what this meant. And as fast as she made it, the fury of her indignation dissolved it, and she had it all to do over again. An enraged woman has a power of imagination and of vindictiveness, where a man is concerned, that the devil might well envy. Slowly the dark pupils of her eyes brightened and glistened in the gathering rain of her tears. This is always an indication of reaction of emotion in a woman, and that she has made up the thing she calls her mind, and which is really the passing formula of her feelings,

into a pious or a cruel resolution. You may be sure when you see them that she has either yielded to martyrdom or to vengeance. In Sylvia's case it was the latter, of course. Such a woman never chooses the sanctities of grief. She determined that never again would she speak to Jim Bone or even recognize his existence. As the tears flowed down her face in a perfect torrent of relief, she was enjoying the most delightful satisfaction of a mortified woman, that of crucifying the man she wanted for a lover. She pictured the times and occasions when she would accomplish his sufferings. She was trampling him in advance beneath her snowy feet, as if he had been the grapes in the wine press of her wrath. At this moment, when he had been utterly discomfited and destroyed in her imagination, there fell upon the bright triangle of sunlight, admitted by the drawn flaps of the tent, the long, exaggerated figure of a man advancing. The next moment Jim Bone stood before her breathless, obviously excited, like a man who has escaped his pursuers.

"Sylvia!" he exclaimed, staring at her with startled eyes. "Sylvia, what is it?"

He had seen the tears, or had he seen them? If so, by what miracle had they disappeared?

With a quick motion of her hands, a flurry of her long, red sleeves, a stiffening of her figure, she sat before him calmly, coolly brilliant, with no more expression of recognition than a gypsy shows to a "customer."

"You will have to cross my palm again before I can go on," said the acquisitive fortune teller.

He "crossed" this time with a larger coin.

"Your hand, please," she demanded. He spread it out before her, each thick finger to itself, the great, rough palm deeply seamed.

She bent her head over it. She studied it, holding aloof as if she were looking at an ugly, crawling beetle.

"You have recently come into a large fortune. You are spending it wisely. You are winning friends. I see the Bone Building open, people streaming through the doors. I hear music inside — and is this the window of a ticket office in one of the towers, with Tony Adams changing money inside?"

Jim snickered, and wondered how soon others would also guess the perfectly patent explanation of the Bone Building.

"I see you lifting tombstones from the quarry, and looking up at Mildred Percey, who — I can't make out what Mildred is doing — she is bringing you notes. She —"

"That's all right!" interrupted Bone. This was the first he knew of how astutely the little epitaph business that Mildred was carrying on had been observed.

The fortune teller drew back apologetically, as if she had inadvertently penetrated into the region of a love correspondence.

Mr. Bone saw the implication as plainly. He

blushed. He would have liked to strangle the innocent poetess.

He brushed his hands together with a quick smacking sound as if he were dusting off a disagreeable matter for which he was in no way responsible.

"Now the future!" he exclaimed.

"The other hand," she said, dismissing his right as if it were an old book too easily read and of little interest.

He yielded his left, spread it wide, as if he prayed her to read it all.

She bent her head over it, her face half-veiled with the long black locks that fell on either side. She caught her breath as if she scarcely believed the evidence of her own eyes. She touched his fingers gingerly, drew them back one at the time to make sure there was no mistake.

His blood leaped up at the cool pressure. He was wild with impatience. Far out upon the lawn he could hear the laughter and clatter of women's voices. He was afraid of an interruption.

"Well?" he exclaimed at last, no longer able to bear the suspense.

"I'd rather not tell," she pronounced softly.

With the egotism of his sex he was delighted at this sudden diffidence. He concluded that it was the modesty of a maiden who could not tell that she saw her own fate in the lines of the rough palm, yet who wished to indicate that this was the case. There is no creature living so blindly quick to believe in his

own attractions as a man. Nothing, neither experience nor observation, will ever teach them that the only women who love them are their wives, these being in a position where they have no choice. But not one of them could be sure of the most tractable maiden ever enclosed by an engagement ring so long as she has the chance of speculating on the love of another man. When a girl is sweetly yielding to her lover, declaring her devotion, swearing tender fidelity, it only means one of two things: that there is no other possible lover in sight, or, most likely, she is merely subtracting the full ratio of his affection by offering the imaginary equation of her own. She is speculating in the only thing women know how to speculate in — the love of man. She is cornering her market in him against the possible other woman. She is the great original inventor of romantic watered stock. She is taking all she can get upon highly coloured representations. She is devouring him. This is fair, for it is exactly what he does to her after marriage. God is a wonderful God. There is no possible chance of false measure between man and man, nor between man and woman in the age-long balancing of His scales of justice. The discrepancies we think we observe are only apparent, and are due to the fact that for one mortal reason or another we have not time to linger long enough beside the registering beam of His weights to see Him drop in a few extra providences to balance the other fellow's luck.

“Sylvia, tell me the future! Oh, confess it, girl!”

whispered Jim, trembling with the ecstasy of having his lover's vanity gratified, and striving to get a glimpse of the fortune teller's face.

"You will have great success and great wealth," she went on evenly. "But in this hand your life line is shortened. You will die young!"

"Never mind when I die," he laughed, still crowding her, as he imagined. "Only say that I shall marry soon!"

"Oh, marry?" she murmured, as if she had not considered that worth foretelling. Then she went back over each line in the great palm, tracing it quizzically with her index-finger. She paused at little romantic cross stitches here and there, dwelt upon them as possibilities, then passed on.

"I cannot find that you do," she announced.

His hand closed instantly and firmly over her fingers.

"You are not looking in the right place, Sylvia," he whispered. "Look at me. You'll find that prophecy written just in front of you if you'll look up!"

She lifted her head and showed him a face of incomparable loveliness, but without a trace of embarrassment or emotion. She was like a red-winged butterfly wheeling beyond his reach. If you have ever observed how little expression there is in a butterfly's countenance you will be better able to interpret a woman like Sylvia. The thing is only a meaningless pair of gorgeous wings, the symbol of what it is not. Sylvia was merely a false intimation, a charm. She

had the body of love, but she was herself nothing but this appearance. In this fleeting moment, when he saw in her all that a man could desire in a woman, she was only the cool mathematician of his passion, the calculating miser of emotions in him which she could not feel herself.

It happened in a moment. Still holding her fingers with his left hand, he thrust the table aside with the other, stood up, drew her to him fiercely, held her, burned her face with kisses.

She was delighted with the computing pleasure of one who adds a digit to his fortune. Never before had she acquired so much in return for what she was really giving nothing, and could give nothing. But the instinct of the mere female was alarmed in her. She struggled to release herself.

“You forget yourself!” she exclaimed.

“I do!— but not you! I think of nothing but you. I have thought of nothing else since the first day I saw you. Everything I do is for you. Everywhere I go, east or west, are steps taken just toward you. I’m tearing down this old town and building it up again, all for you, Sylvia!”

He gasped, dampened, astonished and frenzied afresh by the coolness with which she stood now regarding him, smoothing her dishevelment as collectedly as a bird sits upon a bough and beaks its feathers into place after a flight through the wind.

“I say, it’s all for you. I love you. I want you for my wife. I am living, and dying, for you, darling!”

At this moment there was heard the tapping of a cane upon the gravel of the walk outside. From time immemorial lovers have borne outrageous interruptions, if not with patience, at least without vengeance. Doubtless Cain, that first knight in search of a lady, and finding her in that other land, experienced the same difficulty. He had not more than finished explaining his excellent family connections to her, and taken her hand prefatory to a declaration of his passion, when some stranger passed by, paused and observed with astonishment and vulgar interest that he was dressed as a foreigner. Yet nothing is said in the scriptures of Cain's indignation. Lovers always bear them with the meekness of thieves.

The tapping drew nearer.

"It's Miss Amy!" whispered Sylvia.

She motioned imperatively to the table, which lay upon its side with its legs kicked up at horrified angles. Jim sullenly restored it, right side up between the two chairs.

"Sylvia!" deeply droned Amy's voice.

"Come in, Miss Amy, and get your fortune told," invited Jim Bone, meeting her and guiding her past the tent pole at the entrance between the flaps.

He leaned over and whispered something to Sylvia as Amy settled herself, smiling on the other side of the table. The girl started, flushed, then hesitated.

"But it would be cruel," she whispered in return.

"It's a fact. There is a chance of it. I've written to a specialist about it," he persisted. Then aloud:

"Lay your palms upon the table just so, Miss Amy."

"No, no," she laughed.

"Just to please the fortune teller and me," he insisted.

"Oh, well, have your way," she consented, with the air of an old angel willing to play dominoes with Fate to please the children, not that she cared anything about the issue.

Sylvia uncurled the fingers of the two soft old hands, looked into the dreaming face above them, then at Jim, as if she were doubtful about breaking into so peaceful a slumber. He nodded that she should go on.

"You shall have the desire of your heart!"

"Ah, what is it?" said Amy, as if she good-naturedly searched herself to please them.

"You shall have what you lost a very long time ago."

A change swept over the blind face as if suddenly a curtain had been lifted and profane, earthly eyes saw far within an altar standing in darkness. Sylvia felt the two palms tremble as they were withdrawn and folded together like a book that is closed.

"Never offer a candle to the blind, my dear!" she said, rising. "It is dangerous!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE lawn party at Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's completed Jim Bone's evolution into all the rights and privileges of citizenship in Ruckersville and rendered him the lion of its social circle. He and Bimber could no longer take their walk down Elbert Avenue in the late afternoon without being prettily hailed from at least two or three verandas by the chirruping voice of Mildred Percey or the still more chirruping voice of Mary Yancey. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker herself never failed to wave him a complimentary salutation if she chanced to be walking beneath the autumn trees on the lawn. He was high in the graces of this lady, and had even enjoyed the distinction of declining an invitation to dinner. A certain humorous delicacy made it impossible for him to sit at meat with a man whose posterior he had kicked. And it was a fact that Mrs. Martin had called him in to consult upon ways and means of increasing the Bible Woman's Fund, which was still behind. And if he met Leonora Bell on her way home from school he was always obliged to stand hat in hand in a sidewalk tête-a-tête upon some highly moral subject — the only topics upon which Leonora would converse. Indeed, whenever he found himself approaching this lady, he ex-

perienced the disagreeable sensation of beginning to climb at once, of stepping upon his dead self to some higher thing in her honour. Bimber accepted this change and these interruptions philosophically, passing the time snuffing among the gathering autumn leaves and plummy goldenrod stalks in the trenches which divided the side path from the street, and in talking cheerfully to himself with his tail.

The most intimate Boswell cannot always construe accurately the changes which take place in the habits of his hero, and this author is, therefore, unable to say for certain why Mr. Bone ceased to take his accustomed walk out Elbert Avenue in the late afternoons — whether it was due to the increasing demands of his business or to the fact that the moment he set foot there he became a mere ladies' man and subject to the whims and caprices of veranda femininity; or whether — and this seems most likely — it was because he could get no glimpse of Sylvia about the old house beyond the cow pasture on the edge of town. Upon the one or two occasions when he had made bold enough to call he was received only by old Clark Story, who invariably explained that his daughter was "out," and took a promoter's advantage of the occasion to exploit the mineral possibilities of his grassy corn fields and stump-toed cotton patches. It appeared that Sylvia was hibernating, romantically speaking. He occasionally saw her walking along the streets of the town, red and golden, and wind-blown like the autumn leaves that were now falling from the trees,

and that sometimes accompanied her in little whirls and eddies of motion from the branches above as if they recognized a relationship.

The one place where he continued to meet Sylvia was in Amy's house. Amy, who was sensitive to the cold, had withdrawn from her window during the first gusty days of October and was now always to be found sitting in a tall, straight chair with the fire-light from her hearth, where fragrant hickory logs blazed, illumining her face and bringing out to a more glorious red the roses in her gown. You could have told the season of the year by the bright calendar of shawls upon Amy's shoulders. At this time she wore a little red crocheted shoulder cape. Later she was to be seen wrapped round and round in a thick old-fashioned blanket shawl of more colours than any rainbow could ever flame. Still later, when the March winds dropped down and there was no more danger of neuralgia, she was to be seen with a tiny square of blue cashmere pinned over these same shoulders with a double plait in front. It was her sky-sign to the little spring angels that they might now let the dogwood blossoms out and the red buds and the wild honeysuckle and all that sweet fragrance of April-kissing blossoms which declare that the Lord is good and the earth is beautiful, and more particularly that the sun is now warm enough for an elderly lady-angel still in the flesh to take a few liberties with the weather.

Jim, I say, often found Sylvia meddling with Amy's beads when he came now for his afternoon visit.

It appeared that Amy was teaching Sylvia the marvelous art of beading a girdle for her enchanting waist. I say this *appeared* to be the case. What Sylvia was really doing there, only God and the Sphinx knew. I draw you merely the picture of the scene they made: Jim sitting cross-legged and sideways on his chair, one arm thrown over the back of it, his hat resting upon his knee as if it were a knob, and his face a completely equipped station for the wireless telegraphy of love signalling. Sylvia sat upon the other side of Amy on a low stool, head demurely bowed, drawing great draughts of information from Amy upon the art of sewing beads to a waistband in such a manner that no one afterward could resist the said waist.

But more often than not the entrance of Mr. Bone was a signal for laying aside this work, and the talk was all of Amy's Book of Life, upon which she was very busy these days. The secret had been confided also to Sylvia, who was sometimes called upon to copy strange passages for Amy — the old Angel being subject to irrelevant fits of inspiration when she could not wait for Elbert to come in the evening to write them down for her. Jim was himself the victim of such a mood upon one occasion.

"Jimmy," said Amy, "what is a hero?"

"What is a hero?" stammered Jimmy — "did you say what is a hero?"

It was as if she had asked him to parse a terrible kind of verb. He looked this way and that with the blank expression of a boy who does not know his les-

son. Sylvia added to his confusion by raising her eyes to his face with one of those waiting looks which is not a question but a personal commentary upon the victim.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Never saw one."

"I am wondering," Amy went on dreamily, "if heroism is just an idea we have in our minds, or if God knows that every man is a hero and *we* in our blindness have lost that sense of one another. Since I have been writing these scriptures of men and women in Ruckersville it seems to me I can't make out one man better than another, or so much worse than another, according to all of their deeds. I am needing a hero, Jimmy, or else I've too many heroes. Seems as if my little Book of Life will be spoiled if I can't find a soul to top it off with. I doubt if it's just deeds, anyhow, that make a hero, but it's some quality of the spirit. The Old Testament wouldn't amount to much if it hadn't been for Moses. When it comes to pinning your faith you'd rather believe in a leader like him than in the finest prophecies Isaiah ever wrote. Wish I could find the Moses for my little apochryphal scriptures, a man that could stir up nature to furnish him with a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. I have always thought, Jimmy, that was a great compliment the universe paid Moses, and it shows that the very elements recognize a hero when they see him."

Thus Amy imagined that she held Mr. Bone's attention. As a matter of fact, she only furnished a

high altitude from which he signalled across her to Sylvia with every known art of the masculine eye. And when all is said that can be said of the coquetting of woman's eyes, it amounts to nothing compared with the superior force and boldness of a man's when he is inspired by passion. He will say things with them which no respectable woman would endure to hear translated into the scandal of words. But in this mesmeric language she accepts what he means without so much as the reproach of a blush. Sylvia had reduced her love to this kind of long-distance-kissing silence. After the lawn party at Mrs. Fanning-Rucker's she had avoided being alone with him. But, safely sheltered beneath Amy's protecting wings, she sat like a little coal of fire who enjoyed having herself blown upon by her lover's passion and merely glowing to herself in return but not to him. And never on these occasions when he met her there would she permit him to accompany her home. She made a thousand excuses to avoid this. She would be going to see Mrs. Fanning-Rucker, for example — this lady now professing as much interest in her as if she had made her the ward of her favour. Or she would be going for a little shopping — any where, any way, except straight home accompanied by Mr. Jim Bone. When a man has held you in his arms and kissed you, you become *particeps criminis* if you give him another opportunity to commit it, no matter how much you may wish him to do so. Thus do women preserve the faith and admiration of men at the expense of their

own desires. It is a curious thing about men that they fear and mistrust the character of any woman who confesses a nature and instincts similar to their own, although it is perfectly certain that the good God who made them both and endowed them very similarly is not of the same mind about this matter.

It was about this time that Jim Bone began to take a more than complimentary interest in Amy's Book of Life. Slowly the audacious idea took possession of him to use these scriptures for his own purpose. He had already observed the effect of "The Town Testament" upon the citizens of Ruckersville, with diabolical enjoyment. As a rule, the public opinion of Heaven is too far removed to affect human conduct to any appreciable degree. But if the Recording Angel himself had contributed this serial to the *Monthly Mercury*, the result could not have been more startling to the victims, or more salutary. There were distinct indications of the reversing of earthly judgments and mortal estimates. The "last" was coming "first." Tony Adams, for example, who had long despised himself through being so thoroughly despised by his fellow townsmen, was beginning to shed the deprecating cowardice of his former despair, and was developing a little weedy courage as a man. This may have been due in part to the prominence of his position as Bone's right-hand man, but strangely illuminating interpretations he found in the brow-beaten, timid virtues of a certain young publican who figured in "The Town Testament" undoubtedly con-

tributed to his growing self-confidence, which is often the only virtue a drunkard lacks. Meanwhile, the piety of Mrs. Martin had undergone an eclipse of singular modesty. The old lady was confused. For the first time in her life she was experiencing a diffidence in her business of holding up sinners and castigating them for faults.

The significance of these and many other changes in the manners of Ruckersville saints and anti-saints did not escape the all-observant eye of Jim Bone. He was very far from betraying Amy's secret, and he was still farther from betraying to her the deception which he perceived that Elbert was practising upon her. He was, in fact, considering the possibility of emulating that worthy's example.

It had been his intention to declare the real nature of the Bone Building gently as soon as the interior was finished by putting on an innocent, highly sentimental melodrama. But the more he considered the somnambulance of the town the more salutary he thought it might prove to give the people a mirror drama of their own existence. Nothing is so startling to a man or a community as a sudden vision of himself or itself from the outside. This is sure to prove a stage in the development of muck-raking which is now being accomplished more or less lamely at a too great magazine distance from the place where obnoxious conditions exist. When some local playwright learns to dramatize diseased municipal governments and puts the play on at home where it belongs,

we shall have more immediate results, and not so many thieves will be retained in office after the next election. There were no thieves in Ruckersville, because there was nothing for the town council to steal, no franchise to grant, no water tax to sequester. But there was a criminal amount of negligence to be portrayed and a strain of misleading vindictive piety to be exploited. Bone desired with a wit that was half humorous and half friendly to deliver this community from the bondage of lock-step hypocrisy, beneath which so many respectable communities, especially in the South, suffer and decay, due entirely to an arbitrary and tyrannical interpretation of religion, not according to the great scriptures, but according to some prelate-laden creed of a dominating church. He conceived that he might revive Ruckersville from a gospel which insisted, contrary to the Creator's intention, upon dying to the world. To this end he determined to reinstate some of those amusements and foster some enterprises which freshen and revive the heart of man. And it is all in the way you look at it whether his purpose was diabolical or philanthropical. But this story shall proceed upon the latter hypothesis.

Through Daddisman he collected those issues of the *Monthly Mercury* which contained installments of "The Town Testament." And he spent his evenings during the early part of November whistling and snickering over them in his room at the hotel. The artless veracity with which the author had portrayed life as it appeared and disappeared, modified and ac-

commodated to the varying natures, virtues and vices of different persons, but always the same life of the same town, always damned and obstructed, seemed to him marvellous. It was not a story, but an unconscious indictment, which he concluded might be dramatized advantageously for the victims.

He was destined never to know how incomplete and partial the record was. If, when he was thus engaged in admiring the fulness and accuracy of details it contained, he could have known what was going on in some sacred maiden chambers along Elbert Avenue, he would have comprehended how little is known or can ever be known of men and women as the pitying angels see them. For these were days particularly hard upon the complexions of ladies already past the satin smoothness of youth and increasingly inclined to shrivel and wrinkle in the frosty winds of approaching winter. Every evening Mildred Percey stood before her mirror, hair brushed up and knotted tightly upon the top of her head so that not a strand could escape. There was a row of cold cream jars before her, and fastened to the pin cushion was a slip of paper to which she constantly referred as she went through frightful contortions as she rubbed in the cream and stared at her glowing image in the glass. Presently she laid her head back upon her shoulders, dropped her lower jaw, then released it with singular retchings and twistings of her neck muscles, all the time counting,

“One, two, three, four; one, two, three, four.”

Next she pinched the soft fold of flesh under her chin till it flamed, and finally she wrung a cloth out of a basin of water, swung it rhythmically in the air around her head before applying it to the afflicted part. One might have inferred that she was practising the cruel rites of a chastening penance. As a matter of fact, she was engaged in the effort to rid herself of a double chin according to the directions of Miss Susalie Holdene Crow, a person in Chicago who was making a fortune by selling these directions to ladies similarly burdened with this evidence of too many years.

Mildred had accepted her double chin without a murmur until the appearance of Jim Bone in Ruckersville. Now she was passionately determined to be rid of it.

At the same hour Mary Yancey stood before her mirror similarly engaged with the identical directions. Mary's trouble was exactly the opposite from that which made Mildred's days a burden to her. She was so thin that the frame of her chin needed padding. And she believed herself to be laying on sweet folds of pink fat as she massaged her face and neck. One thing to note in passing is the credulity of women upon which Miss Susalie Holdene Crow's very profitable business was founded. She sold the same directions to both fat and lean customers, guaranteeing to each the desire of her heart at the very reasonable sum of five dollars.

Comedy is often pathos turned wrong side out.

Nothing could have been more diverting to watch than the switchings, pinchings, pattings, cruel applications of hot and cold water with which the mature maidens of Mr. Bone's acquaintance afflicted themselves; but if you understand the reason, it was heart-rending, especially as Mildred's chin remained blandly double, and Mary's continued to hint at the narrow pointed shape of her skeleton. However, these secrets of the feminine heart are too sacred to be exploited upon any stage. They belong to tragedy, not to comedy. And we cannot be too thankful that no muck-raker or dramatist has yet dared to betray them. They are set down here merely to illustrate how little we know of one another, especially where women are concerned.

Bone's correspondence with a certain playwright in New York ended by his tearing out all the instalments of "The Town Testament" from the *Monthly Mercury* and sending them to this same address. Then followed weeks when that functionary who combined the businesses of being both the station agent and telegraph operator at Ruckersville was often puzzled by the "hurry up" messages which Bone sent to this person or persons in New York. He was astonished by the extravagant number of words which Bone's telegrams contained, and especially by their enigmatical character. Sometimes Magnis & Luster ordered goods by wire, often cotton buyers sent and received information to and from their firms, but the little agent could make nothing of an order

for "stars" and "scenery." The thing that distracted him and excited his curiosity beyond bounds was Bone's repeated wires declaring that he must have "an old star of gentle and agreeable appearance."

"What in hell is this 'old star' brand of goods?" he murmured to himself. And what manner of man was it who insisted that the said star must be dim and decrepit, or he would have nothing to do with it? No young and frisky planet need apply, it seemed, to the growing magnet of Ruckersville.

The agent scratched his head and wondered if he ought to speak to somebody about it, when Bone, who had apparently satisfied himself with a star of sufficient age and respectability, sent another enigmatical message. It read:

"Must have twenty girls, good shapes, and limber-legged."

A man might be rich and powerful and industrious, and still be crazy, reflected the telegraph operator as he filed this message. There was no doubt about Bone's wealth or his enterprise. Everybody felt it. He had become the village cocktail. He was the very highball of its existence. The town was beginning to "boom." There was talk of a cotton factory in the near future. Strangers were frequently seen on the streets or driving out with Mr. Bone to examine the property of the famous "Broad River Power Company" which had bankrupted so many of the descendants of Colonel Jo Rucker in their efforts to harness it for gins and mills. What the poor litt

old operator could not understand was why a man so much engaged in strictly masculine affairs could want with "twenty good-shaped, limber-legged girls."

"Maybe he thinks he'll have a harem, too!" he murmured to himself, wagging his head.

CHAPTER XIX

THE “cake dough” humanity of Ruckersville described in the early part of this story was now being leavened in all directions by what may be called the Jim Bone yeast. A vigorous carnal spirit now began to manifest itself in the very saints. There is nothing like money to alleviate anxiety, whether worldly or unworldly. And for the first time since the Civil War this delightful root of all evils was sprouting thriftily in the town. Seeing the chance of good wages, the streets were cleared of idlers, and to some extent even of the aristocrats, who are always the last class anywhere to get busy, being deterred by the sense of being the lilies of the field. The church was more prosperous than it had been for years. The pastor was sure of his salary and equally sure of getting all his collections, to say nothing of the honour and advantage he should have among his brethren for being “instrumental” in getting a new and better church built the following year out of ear-shot of the quarry. Of all the institutions created by man, the church is the most patient and age-long in its greed. And it is the most easily satisfied with money. Brother Ellis was far from suspecting such a change, but his very sermons had lost much of that mournful spirit with which he was ac-

customed to exhort mortals to put on their immortality. His gospel was more amiable and soothing to the flesh. He was like a man relieved of a long supernatural indigestion. And it goes without saying that he was hand in glove with Mr. Bone. A preacher often has a deal of trouble praying and fasting himself into a proper relation with his Heavenly Father, but he is one of the quickest and most enterprising of his kind when it comes to locating and relating himself acquisitively to some earthly source of merely temporal salvation. There is not a single unscrupulously rich man in this country who cannot number among his closest flattering friends some distinguished clergyman of some distinguished church. Any house of God in our times becomes a roosting place of millionaires resting on the Sabbath from their blood businesses, provided they choose this sanctuary for that purpose. And, for me, I am bound to say that it seems a great tribute to the nature of God that such persons should still have a craving for even some kind of imitation holiness. But the trouble is with the preachers whose ethics are dollar-marked the moment some old stock-exchange gamecock takes a notion to attend divine services in one of their churches. And they are so naive, so self-deceived by the spirit in which they welcome him and pet him with cheerful but expensive salvation. The one fellow who is never deceived and never saved in such a church is the old gold-wattle gamecock. He smiles to himself every time the collection plate passes him and he buys good-natured public opinion by a

liberal contribution, and, spiritually speaking, he spits in the face of the preacher who lets him off so easy. God pities them in a peculiar manner and will undoubtedly make special provision for the salvation of all railroad and trust magnates. They get so little sincere and faithful ministry from His cowardly servants in this world.

But that is neither here nor there in this tale. What I set out to tell was a far more agreeable incident than anything connected with the prosperity of the church at Ruckersville, and for which our hero was directly responsible.

It was a bright day early in November, which is often the most pleasant month of the year in middle Georgia. Every leaf on every tree in the town had "turned," as we say, some golden, some red, some a deeper green, and all had changed to vagabonds in the wind, falling, whirling, drifting from their boughs in that last drunken revelry of leaves before they lie brown and dead and sodden under foot.

Jim Bone sat in his dingy office, tilted far back in his chair, with his feet on top of his desk. He was smoking like a furnace at the end of a long black cigar, and he had the appearance of a man who was making up his mind to carry through a big deal. Nothing could have surpassed the seriousness nor the determination of his countenance. Tony Adams, who came in for some orders connected with a shipment of granite to Atlanta, observed it, sat down beside the little red-hot stove and

waited. He had learned that it was never well to interrupt his friend when he wore this head-on collision expression. Presently he took out his handkerchief and blew his nose loudly, thoroughly. This was a delicate way he had of calling attention to himself. It may be that Bone heard him, for he stirred in his chair, reached up and settled his hat at a hectoring angle upon his head and began to drum imperatively upon the arm of his chair with the fingers of his right hand. This was an exceedingly unpleasant sound to Mr. Adams, not that he had any of those fine social sensibilities which shrink from this offensive clatter of finger nails upon a hard substance, but upon the two or three occasions when he had been overtaken by his besetting sin of drunkenness the subsequent interview with Jim had always been prefaced by this furious thunder of his fingers upon the arm of his chair. Tony searched himself now for the cause of these signs of rising wrath, and could find nothing in his conduct to warrant them. He straightened himself with mild indignation. No man is so profoundly conscious of his innocence as one who has been guilty seventy times seven, but not this time. It seemed that the proud creaking of Mr. Adams' chair at this moment attracted Mr. Bone's attention. He lifted his feet from his desk, whirled around upon the pivot under him, faced Mr. Adams, and brought both feet down with a whacking clatter upon the floor.

"Ah, Tony, I was just thinking of you," he said,

gripping the end of his cigar with his teeth and skinning his lips back so that his very molars showed. This gave him an expression of singular ferocity, so that Tony remained silent, but with the expression of a man who knows himself to be innocent in the face of a coming accusation.

"You know that I have your interest at heart," Bone went on.

But Tony refused to commit himself by word or gesture. He sat regarding his friend with the air of an innocent little boy contemplating a switch.

"And I have plans for you,"

The countenance of Mr. Adams relaxed and brightened accordingly.

"You are doing well, but I want to see you do better. I want to feel safe about your future, Tony."

"Jim," said he, the tears springing into his eyes and giving them the soft radiance of a child, "you are the best friend, the only friend, I ever had!"

"It's time for you to settle down," continued Bone.

"Ain't I settlin'?" Tony demanded happily.

"A man's never settled till he's married and has the cares of a family to hold him. You must get married, Tony."

"My God!" ejaculated Mr. Adams. If Bone had shot at him he would not have experienced a more horrified, sinking sensation.

"I want you to marry Mildred Percy," said this

Cupid, fixing his victim with his unmistakable long-horned expression.

"But, Jim, I'm not a marryin' man," Tony protested.

"None of us are. Nature, just nature, never intended any man to be decent enough for marrying. But you need a wife, same as a good horse needs a rider if he wins the race."

"I don't care nothin' about winnin' no race, Jim," pleaded Tony. "All I want is to trot along here beside you, with a day loose now and then in the pasture."

"Exactly," exclaimed Bone severely. "Them days in the pasture are the ones I'm plannin' to guard you against. It's all right for a colt to snort around and kick up his heels in a paddock, but for a horse of your age and habits, Tony, a bridle and martingales are the only salvation."

"Why don't you take your own medicine?" ventured Mr. Adams indignantly. "Why don't you marry Mildred yourself?"

"Because I aim to marry somebody else. Besides, I wouldn't suit a girl of her sweet disposition. I'm a rough devil. I'm the kind of prose that never could be made to rhyme with such poetry as hers," explained Jim in a noble, deprecating manner.

Tony stared at him blankly. His round, weak, fair face was the picture of despair. His mouth drooped at the corners, the little, thin, yellow moustache beneath his nose sagged with it. His round, light blue

eyes held the expression of innocent morning skies through which a strong and disastrous wind is blowing.

"And she is just the woman for you," the match-maker went on. "I have observed her closely. She has that sweet consideration you would need in a wife."

Mr. Adams responded by merely wagging his head from side to side lugubriously.

"Why, Tony, you won't know yourself in a month after you have married Mildred!" he encouraged. "She belongs to that class of women who lay their husbands in the cradle the minute they get them and who spend the rest of their days nursin' and tendin' durin' the long teethin' period of life. The less you deserved, the more she would do and give. That's the holy hymn nature of women like Mildred."

This was the beginning of the argument between Jim and Tony Adams which lasted for several hours, and out of which Tony came dazed and convinced that the only safety for him was in marriage, and the only happiness would be in marrying Mildred Percey. The character and gentle beauty of this maiden were represented to him in language so eloquent and so authoritative that if he had been a stone he must have risen up, shaved, put on a clean shirt and gone to court her. He was thrilled to the point of a strange exhilaration as he left the office of his friend.

"You are as blind as a mole, Tony," said Jim,

clapping him on the back as the latter stumbled toward the door, smiling sheepishly. "I've seen that she was in love with you ever since I've been here!"

"And I thought it was you she was thinkin' of," murmured the now inspired lover.

"Oh, she was tryin' to attract your attention then, Tony. She don't care the snap of her finger for me. If I was to so much as smack my lips at Mildred, she'd never get over it, she'd be so indignant."

"Well, I declare!" answered Tony, with the air of a wet bird who has made up his mind to shake his tail feathers clear of the flood and dry himself in the pleasant warmth of a woman's eyes.

At eight o'clock on the evening of the same day Mildred Percey sat before a smouldering log fire in her parlour. She was dressed with a kind of despairing sweetness in a blue worsted gown with a lace yoke, and a black girdle of ribbons, the ends of which hung down behind. The trouble with most women is that they have only a dressmaker's sense of sex. They copy a fashion even if the fashion conceals their particular charm. They do not dare to wear a bow if bows are not the style. And no instinct warns them against ruffles if frills are "in," even though these give them the appearance of a frizzly hen. Mildred was of this class. She was always copied externally from a Butterick model. She would no more have taken a liberty with her *Delineator* than she would have perverted the scriptures. And this authority always favoured blue for blondes. Therefore, it was incon-

ceivable to her that she would enhance her value, especially to man, who is the chief appraiser of women, if, for example, she had chosen a carmine gown for the evening. This shade of red makes an opal of any fair woman and deepens the cool, innocent blue of her eyes with the reflected glow, so that beneath the azure you behold the effulgence of flames, a sweet fire, so mysterious and so dear. Besides, no other colour is so ageless in its significance, nor so intimately related to the instinct of life. This is why, you will have observed, that every man prefers red to any other colour. It is the semaphore of his own nature. If he says he likes blue, or even green, better, you may know that he has departed from his own tastes and told a lie to please you, or that he has lost his right feeling about the significance of colours. Fortunately for Mildred, the fire upon the hearth did for her what she had not the sense to do for herself. The light of it covered her with warmth and infused her with a certain radiance quite foreign to real character.

Still she was sad. Whenever an unmarried woman of thirty-five is alone, and not diverted from her natural feelings by some absorbing occupation, she is always sad. This is much worse than being married and worried or anxious. It is really the absence of this kind of worry and anxiety that makes her sad. She was recalling a visit she had made to Mr. Bone's office early in the morning to deliver the last of the epitaphs for the soldiers' tombstones. She could not deny to herself the coolness and indifference with

which she had been received and dismissed. In vain she accused him of his faults, of his uncouth manners, of his indelicacy, of his lack of poetic appreciation. Still the fascination remained. She was destined never to know that the explanation of this fiercely masculine enchantment was due to the fact that the social customs of Ruckersville had rendered virtue negative in women and vitality a sort of scandal. So, when the figure of life appeared there in top boots ruthlessly and bravely compounded of all the splendour which sometimes attends upon a man who has enjoyed and suffered the privilege of being as bad and as good as he pleased, the effect of such a personality upon such a woman was irresistible. However, the handmaiden of the Muses had the advantage of distilling her sadness into poetry, which is one of the most soothing uses to which unrequited love may be put. I have said that she was sad, but this does not mean that she was not really enjoying herself. There is nothing a woman may enjoy more than her own broken heart, especially when it inspires the tintinabulation of funeral-bell rhymes.

She sat with her eyes tenderly suffused with tears, scribbling corrections here and there above the lines of a poem which she had just composed, and which lay breathing like a newly born grief upon the old writing desk on her knee.

And I do not copy the thing here for its intrinsic worth, but merely to indicate how poorly words geared together here in poetry express the pathos of a certain

state of being. It was written in a languishing chi-rography, with supine l's and t's, and little i's that gaped at the bottom with tearless griefs.

THE HEART BOWED DOWN

*I sit and weep the whole day long.
Unhappy is my lot;
No balm can heal my bleeding heart,
For, oh! he loves me not.*

*The cruel shaft from Cupid's bow
Went straightway to the spot;
While cold, unpierced his I ween,
For, oh! he loves me not.*

*I wander lonely through the grove;
Alas, I am forgot!
To seek the grove my solace now,
For, oh! I am forgot.*

No condemnation is too strong against social customs which can reduce love and nature in a good woman to such a pimply expression of neurasthenic sentimentality. Two reforms at least should be worked in their behalf. First, marriageable bachelors should be forced by law to propose, and every magazine of fashions should have a glowing supplement devoted to "styles for women in love."

But nothing is truer than this, "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," and if we were not so narrow in our interpretations of His providences we should have long since discovered that our

Heavenly Father is a tender and benign humorist often in His dealings with us.

As Mildred sat softly scanning her verses there came a knock at the door. Instantly she arose from her chair and transferred this scanning to herself. That is to say, she put both hands on her hips and pulled herself this way and that through her waist bands, smoothed the lace upon her bosom as if the inward turbulence of her spirit had ruffled her breast feathers. Then she touched her hair, peering at herself in the mirror over the mantel, and wriggled her finger into her little curls so that they rhymed better with her ears. No woman, I may observe here, is willingly the poetess of anything but her own person.

At last Mildred went to the door with that anticipatory palpitation an unmarried woman always feels in the evening when she hopes she hears Fate whacking upon her door sill with a valentine in his hand. She prayed as she laid her hand upon the knob that it might not be Arthur Bourne. She was weary of the futility of playing Mr. Bourne's accompaniments for him.

Outside a man stood in the moonlight, mottled with the shadows of an old rose vine that swung to a trellis upon one side of the veranda. He held his hat in his hand, and it was to be observed that his blond hair was parted far over to the left in order to conceal a bald spot about the size of a fifty-cent piece which still gleamed like the human skin through a thread-bare place.

"Oh, it's you, Tony. Father will be sorry to miss you. Come in," said Mildred in a tone plainly expressing disappointment.

Mr. Adams had never called on her, although he sometimes dropped in to talk to Mr. Percey or even to trundle him back and forth along the veranda. The old gentleman was the victim of a mild paresis, and among other notions believed that he would catch his death of cold if even the wheels of his chair touched the ground.

Mildred had put her invitation to "come in" last, because she expected him to refuse it when he learned that Mr. Percey was asleep. She was surprised, therefore, when he entered, hung his hat upon the rack, and followed her back into the parlour. He parted his coat tails and sat down upon the opposite side of the hearth while she took up from the piano where she had laid it the sheet of note-paper upon which was written the verses, resumed her chair, and began folding and refolding it. She was looking into the fire. No one ever paid much attention to Tony Adams. He was to be endured, not considered. She wondered vaguely why he had come in, for, long since, he had reached that stage of masculine disintegration when a man, still on perfectly good terms with other men, no longer calls upon the ladies. It is not that they have marked him down, but it is his last tribute, his last gallantry to the sex, a silent acknowledgment that he no longer considers himself good enough for such modest and virtuous company.

Several moments of firelit silence elapsed before Mildred suddenly realized that her visitor had not spoken, either at the door or since he entered the parlour. It was queer, this silence, like a third person, a stranger, in the room. She looked up and was astonished. Tony had the appearance of having just finished the Marathon race. His forehead was thickly beaded with sweat. His eyes were strained and fixed upon Mildred as if he saw the goal but had not quite reached it. He was breathing rapidly, like a man nearly spent.

“Why, Tony, what is it?” exclaimed Mildred.

He continued silent, but if she could have understood she would have known that he was still footing it in her direction as fast as the legs of his courage would carry him.

“What has happened?” she demanded now in genuine alarm. She felt rather than saw the runner, felt the tension of the last spurt of speed. And she was mystified with the strange contagion of excitement. There was a contradiction somewhere, for at this moment Tony arose very leisurely from his chair, put both hands in his pockets, humped up his shoulders, stared at the smouldering logs, then reached a foot across and kicked them meditatively. A fury of sparks flashed out into the room, and they blazed noisily with the crackling, singing sound of green hickory.

“Nothing has happened,” he announced, after a thrilling pause.

He had finished the race. He was there, about to fling himself at her feet. His excitement had passed. He was in for it now, as cool as a man who had nerved himself for death or for another life. It is not often given a woman to be so utterly unconscious of the presence of a lover. Usually they see them afar off. Every woman has a field glass for this purpose. Mildred's confusion arose from the fact that she had been watching for some one in a totally different direction. She sat now regarding Tony, who had faced about and stood with his back to the fire very near her. She was like a sapphire in her blue gown, inlaid with sweet red blazes, as she lifted her eyes to Tony's face.

"Mildred, can you forgive me?" he demanded, with a contrition so deep and so genuine that the angels must have believed him.

"Forgive you what?" she asked with the pre-occupied air of a woman who is tying a knot behind her where she cannot see what she is doing.

"For being so long about it!" he confessed.

"I do not understand," she murmured.

"Mildred, all these years I have loved you. That's been the one decent occupation I had, loving you."

She flushed softly, entirely from neck to brow, put her hand to her heart, and continued to gaze at Tony.

"Never, I believe, did any man love any woman as I love you, Mildred. That accounts for my silence. I knew I was not fit to kiss the hem of — the hem of your — I mean I wasn't fit, don't you see!"

In the beginning God created the heavens and the

earth, and He did it, according to Genesis, in six days. But, for me, I have the faith to believe that He could have done it in the twinkling of an eye. The proof is that he can recreate a man or a woman in half a twinkling any time — a performance much more complicated and requiring more different kinds of dexterity than the modelling of a dozen planets. In this instance, when the eyes of Mildred met those of Tony, both were remade, thrillingly new and filled with joys unspeakable. After all, at thirty-five it is not so much this man or that a maiden wants, but it is love in any sort of vessel. And Tony was enjoying probably for the first time in his life that peculiar and most nearly divine inspiration a man ever has, that of lying to a woman in the rhetorical vocabulary of love, and especially of confessing his sins to her in a manner to wring and tie her heart to him forever.

“Often and often I’ve wanted to come to you and confess everything and ask you to strengthen me. I felt that if I could only have had your love I could have been different,” he went on with a sob so deep and sincere that he believed himself.

“Oh, why didn’t you, Tony? I’d have helped you. I never suspected,” she whispered.

Already she had laid him in the cradle of her heart, the precious infant such a woman must always make of such a husband.

There was a low stool beside her upon which she was accustomed to set her foot when she used the knee above it for an exalted pinnacle upon which the old

writing desk rested when she wrote her verses. Tony dropped down upon it now, close to the same knee. He drew one of her hands to his lips and then sat holding it tight to his flaming cheek. At that she experienced a singular ease which extended through all of her members to the last pinfeather of her immortal spirit. No magnetism is physical. It is always spiritual, either good or bad. Her heart hovered over him like a dove with sweetly folded wings.

"You love me?" he questioned, as if it were too much to hope for.

"Yes!" she sighed, utterly content.

"And to think I have missed it all these years. If I had only dared to hope it, how different I might have been!" he groaned in delicious regret, lifting his face to her with the imploring-to-be-kissed look that men acquire at this moment and that all women expect.

"Mildred," he cried, "I'd never have drunk a drop if I'd ever have thought you could have kissed me!"

Each believed the other implicitly, after the manner of lovers. Neither had the sense to know that he would go on "drinking" now and then to the end of his days, breaking and mending each other's heart ever afresh, and that their love would abide the more firmly based upon this sorrow. For love is the one plant in the garden of life which dies in the too salubrious climate of perfect grace. It must be pruned now and then with the sharp edge of grief. It must be watered with a few feminine tears to insure new spring growths.

At this moment Tony came upon the little folded slip of paper in his lady's other hand. She held it so tightly that he at once asserted a lover's right to her confidence, whether poetic or otherwise. He drew the paper from her tenderly resisting fingers.

"May I?" he asked.

She made such ado about it, only half-consenting, and leaping to her feet, suffused with blushes, while turning her head away, that he felt at once the necessity of knowing her exquisite secret.

"Darling!" he whispered a moment later, rising and thrusting the precious poem into his breast and drawing her to him. "To think that you have suffered, too! I could kill myself for causing you such pain. Forgive me!" he kissed.

She forgave him. And she had the high air of doing it as if she forgave him for wresting forcibly from her the very scriptures of her heart as she permitted his caresses.

CHAPTER XX

THE advent of a Jew and of Cupid are often simultaneous in a town about to pull off its antebellum night cap and awaken to a fresher interest in love and real estate. Jews, you will have observed, deal more exclusively in Cupid merchandise than any other salesmen.

In November of this same year, a short, dark, fat man named Cohen, with a Hebraic nose, and wearing trousers that bagged in front but stuck tight in his legs behind, came to Ruckersville and opened a store for "dry goods" only. That is to say, no molasses odour clung to his establishment. Rather, it smelled of Cashmere bouquet and toilet waters, a new beverage in Ruckersville. His stock was composed almost exclusively of feminine blandishments, hats, ribbons, laces, and dress goods. Cupid had been before him and created a market for these things — Cupid and Jim Bone, the latter having been largely instrumental in developing those merely material which insure cash to the Jew.

Never before had the women of Ruckersville moulted their summer muslins into such a variety of brilliant and expensive winter fabrics. The prosperity of any place may be judged by the extravagance of its women

and the corresponding affluence of its Jews. If it were not clearly shown in the scriptures that Jews are very ancient people, one might be tempted to believe them to be a new race developed to study and supply the vanities of modern women. Certainly this is the way they all get what in common vernacular is called "a start," and it is the way most of them keep going — by selling stuff to women, everything, from antique furniture to furs, anything from rice buttons to jewels. And Mr. Solomon Cohen was especially gifted in choosing those wares and substances which gladden the heart and charm the competitive eyes of women. Therefore, never before had the ladies of Ruckersville been so cheerful, so confidently anticipatory of the sweetheart future. Never had the married ones indulged themselves so much in what all married women have tastes for, "durable" things. You may always know by that one word whether the woman at the counter is married or unmarried. If she is single, she is looking for "shades" and "effects." She is wondering how this or that will look by lamplight. But if she is a wife and mother, she leaves the mere question of shade and colour to God Almighty, and insists upon getting something "durable." Meanwhile, there is not even a shade's difference between her extravagance and that of the maiden. If there is a Jew anywhere around to interpret their vanities and cupidities, every woman becomes extravagant. Probably only Cohen knew that there was no difference between Mrs. Martin,

who had a passion for table linen, and Mildred Percey, except that the merchant must exercise proper discretion about what he offered to each. He complimented Mrs. Martin's thrift and Mildred's "artistic" sense, and collected as much from the one as he did from the other.

But, coming back to Cupid and clothes, I say that the women were unusually happy in Ruckersville this winter and cheerfully anticipatory of the sweetheart future. Doubtless it is exactly the way a bird feels with fresh wings and tail feathers. Mildred Percey's engagement had been announced, and she was now engaged upon an epic, every stanza of which was a pink or blue wedding gown. Leonora Bell appeared completely disguised in a red tailor-made coat suit. You might have mistaken her for a pretty little pine-cone lady nearly enveloped in a bright flame. And, looking back, I have often wondered if Mary Yancey did not owe the happy ending of her long imaginary romance more to the peacock blue frock she wore that autumn than to the last prediction of the fortune teller.

For various reasons Miss Yancey had relaxed her vigilance upon municipal affairs during the past few months. Colonel Lark, the mayor, waited in vain for some committee of the "Woman's Club" to appear. He began to think he would be forced to choose himself between Miss Yancey and Miss Bell which he would make the future Mrs. Lark, and this was a painful possibility for him to contemplate, being a

kind-hearted man and loath to disappoint any one, least of all a charming woman. He was devoutly thankful that Mildred had been eliminated. And if custom had permitted, he would gladly have asked both of the other committee belles to marry him, not that he was an indecent person with Mormonistic tendencies, but he was endowed with a kind of universal gallantry where women were concerned. Every time he made up his mind to put on his silk hat on Sunday afternoon and step down to the Yanceys, fall upon his knees, and lay his heart at Mary's feet, he was deterred by the thought of Leonora crimping along through the lonely years, shrivelling a little day by day, with no one to rescue her from the lady principalship of the Ruckersville Academy. And the vision was so pathetic that he set his hat back upon the shelf in his closet, put on his old slouch-brimmed one, and went down to Bilfire's saloon and took a drink with the boys. On the other hand, if he made up his mind, after seeing Leonora in the red tailor-made coat suit, to put on his silk hat some Saturday evening and step down to the little school-ma'am's boarding house, and pour out the tale of his undying love to her, standing in eloquent relief before her parlour fireplace, he was restrained by a compassionate consideration of Mary Yancey, who, so far as he knew, would thus be left without a hope in the world of ever being married. And the thought of her growing more and more angular, taking more and more interest in municipal affairs, aggravating him

with petitions at every turn, was so distressing that he would sigh, rub the brim of his silk hat affectionately, set it back upon the shelf in the closet, put on his other hat and go down to Bilfire's saloon, where he would pass the evening in an unusually thankful mood on account of having had the courage to remain faithful to both of his lady loves till such a time as providence might see fit to remove one or the other of them from the romantic map of his affections.

This happened sooner than any one could have expected. Along about Thanksgiving Day Ruckersville was engaged in the usual turkey-dressing expectations, in the usual gossip about the Jim Bone Building, which had been finished inside behind closed doors and now stood ready for whatever it was intended for, and in fresh speculations about the absence of Mr. Bone from the city, some holding that he was in Atlanta closing a deal for the Broad River Power Company, others that he was known to have purchased a ticket to New York, where he was said to be completing arrangements for the opening of the Bone Building. Tony Adams was the one person who professed total ignorance of his employer's whereabouts and of his business. But it was generally conceded that Tony had become "a blithering ass" since his engagement to Mildred Percey. In the Ruckersville masculine vocabulary "blithering" meant impudent, unwarranted assurance and conceit. Tony showed every symptom of this long-eared disease. He strutted, held his head up, answered inquiries

about his own and Bone's affairs curtly, and in various ways gave signs of getting "too big for his breeches," which always make other men hate a man and all women admire him, if he knows how to do it. So Tony had at last entered into the fine state of manhood — that is to say, he was experiencing the jealous opposition of men and the exaltation of women.

Well, I say, the town was stimulated and active with these various businesses and speculations when suddenly the lightning from the outer world hit it in another spot. It was rumoured the day before Thanksgiving that Leonora Bell had had the manuscript of her last book accepted by a New York publishing house, and that the said publishers had wired her money for travelling expenses and an invitation to come on and talk over the details of the contract. If any one was mean enough to doubt this report they had only to look at Leonora to have it confirmed. Nothing in the annals of our common life ever has or ever will surpass the sudden exaltation of the little teacher into an author with a publisher. An author without a publisher bears a singular resemblance to a person who is not an author at all. But let a man or woman who "writes" get a publisher, and you are apt to see a metamorphosis which has doubtless astonished the very angels in heaven. I myself once knew a man who wrote a poem on "The Watermelon" which was published in the back of an Eastern magazine. He was a simple-minded gentleman with pleasant manners whose wife supported him by keeping boarders.

But from the day when this poem appeared in type till the day of his death he was a proud stranger in our midst. He held himself sadly aloof. And if by chance he permitted himself to be drawn into company, he would take no part in conversation, but was wont to sit and gaze into abstraction or out of the window. His wife continued to support him, but with this difference: she did it with the mingled pride and humility of a lesser mortal providing for the material wants of a superior being. Leonora Bell had something of this grand air which goes with having suddenly achieved greatness. She stepped along the streets of Ruckersville with cosmopolitan indifference. The ingratiating smile with which she was wont to bow to the patrons of her school was gone. She refused to see any one. At a meeting of the "Woman's Club" she openly resented the claim advanced by Mrs. Fanning-Rucker that at last the work of the club would be known by its fruits. She refused to be the fruits of anything but her own endeavours. It was a fact that week after week she had read chapters from this manuscript at the club, but at the time she had felt the inadequacy of the praise bestowed, and she had resented the timid criticism offered. Now that the proof of her ability was before them, they wished to share her glory. She was indignant, and showed it. The members were properly cowed. They unconsciously adopted the advice of Socrates in his reference to Alcibiades: "Nurse not a lion whelp within your walls; but if there, soothe the brute." They soothed

Leonora, and were as much astonished at her whelpishness as the ancient Athenians must have been at the cavorting of young Alcibiades.

The title of her "work"— she persisted in calling it that — was "Young Animals I Have Known." The "young animals" were the little girls she had taught. Never perhaps had the embryo frailties of femininity in all its forty phases of the forty girls been so keenly delineated. If Miss Bell had cut the cuticle on their little backs and skinned them after the manner of dressing rabbits, she could not have left less of it on them. And it is a fact that the book has since made her famous. The only thing to set down here is that she immediately resigned her position as lady principal, packed her things and left for the East, with the air of one who is at least free from the envy and littleness of small people. From time to time during the next year wonderful accounts of her appeared in the eastern papers. Ruckersville was positively pop-eyed at the biographical exaggerations in these interviews. They pitied Leonora because the reporters lied so about her, all to suit the Southern atmosphere and her old Southern family, a setting very interesting if one single word of it had been true. Of one thing there could be no doubt: Miss Bell was weeding a wide row in the metropolis of American life. The fact that it was mostly weeds was the knowledge Leonora herself got after she ceased to be exploited in the Sunday supplements.

But, coming back to the present November in

Ruckersville, Mary, I have said, had relaxed her vigilance upon Colonel Lark and municipal affairs. This was due in part to the fact that the "Woman's Club" had been overtaken by a diffidence since the appearance of "The Town Testament" papers. There had been something embarrassingly accurate in the gentle philosophical explanation of their civic reform activities as interpreted by The Recording Angel. They preferred to wait until the said Angel passed them by. This appeared to be the case now. For, since the first instalment of "The Town Testament," the bowels of the club's inner life had not been exposed.

But Mary's municipal interests had been interrupted more by the invalidism of Agnes than by the old Angel. From being the gentlest, most self-effacing of all feminine creatures, Agnes had become the most tyrannical and exacting. Your meek woman is a veritable Tartar once she learns to feel her oats as an invalid. For years she had yielded obedience to the superior will of her elder sister, but suddenly with the advent of this strange backache and the doctor Mary found the tables completely turned upon her. She became the slave of Agnes, the Boswell of her complaints in the town, the handmaiden and second-fiddle, in short, to a strong and hysterically dominating personality, such as invalids know so well how to develop.

Now, however, since the cooler weather, things were moving more smoothly. Agnes, having got the

distinction of an "operation," never before accorded to a woman in Ruckersville, was enjoying it, although she held on to her anti-operatic symptoms, begrudging herself each pain as it passed. She sat proudly weak in her invalid's chair, frequently with a thermometer in her mouth, hoping to prove a little fever, just enough to have the doctor, or she languidly entertained her friends with accounts of how she felt under her anesthetic.

Thus it happened that Mary had time to resume in some part the even tenor of her way. At a meeting of the club immediately after the departure of Leonora a report was called for from the committee appointed to wait upon Colonel Lark with a petition against spitting on the streets.

Instantly Mildred Percey arose, showing a delicate primrose colouring in her cheeks as she looked coyly about the room.

"Madam President," she murmured, "I want to ask to be relieved from duty upon this committee. It is not that I am no longer interested in the improvements and sanitation of our grand old town — but —" she hesitated, lowered the lids over her eyes, then lifted them and fixed them softly upon vacancy — "but I am so busy now that I can scarcely find time for committee work."

A smile flitted like a winking, winged butterfly from face to face around the room.

"You are excused, Mildred, under the circumstances. We all know how absorbed you must be

at present!" said Mrs. Fanning-Rucker in her most complimentary and intimate manner, as she passed from Mildred to Mary with an interrogation point in her eye.

"Madam President," responded Miss Yancey, "although left alone upon this committee, I am unwilling that the matter shall fail of attention. I shall take it up with the mayor at once, and hope to report progress at our next meeting."

This was on Monday after Thanksgiving. On Tuesday afternoon Colonel Lark was seated alone in his office. He was not smoking. He was "chewing," having just finished a game of checkers with Captain Martin, who had offered him his "Graverly and Miller's," from which Colonel Lark had cut a thick three-cornered quid of delightful succulence. He was still idly fingering the "men" on the checkerboard, and utterly unmindful of a frightful predicament which was about to overtake him. Colonel Lark was a man without premonitions, or fate might have warned him. As it was, he lazily fumbled a king in the double corners and rolled his quid from one cheek to the other. He would have expectorated before now only the cuspidor was on the front side of the desk and he was behind it. This would necessitate his rising and walking around to insure his not missing the cuspidor. He would do so presently, as soon as he had studied out this move, disastrous to a king in the "double corners."

At this moment there was a knock at the door.

“Come!” said the Colonel. He was expecting the Captain back.

The next instant he started to his feet, astonished and desperate. A vision in peacock blue was advancing upon him. Never had Mary looked so well, so nearly pretty, and she was alone.

Colonel Lark was noted for his “manners,” and he never surpassed in chivalric effect the bow he now swept before Miss Yancey as he attempted to conduct her to the chair he had just vacated. It was all the more impressive because of his silence. But she declined to consider the chair behind the desk.

“Oh, no! That is the mayor’s chair. I’ll sit here!” she retorted sweetly, composing herself in the one nearest the cuspidor and looking up at the Colonel, smiling.

She had outwitted him, but he was not yet beaten. Sweeping her another bow, with a face that expressed every emotion a woman loves in a man, he started for the door, the plain intimation of his manner being, “Excuse me for a moment while I stop this racket out here and arrange that we shall not be disturbed!”

But she instantly arose and intercepted him.

“Oh, no! Colonel Lark; if you take any trouble about me I shall be sorry I came, and really the noise does not disturb me!”

As a matter of fact, the passing footsteps had already died away upon the distant staircase in the hall outside. The Colonel fell back before her. He could neither reach the cuspidor nor the door. And

it was impossible for him to speak. The idea of lowering his head and spitting upon the floor before a lady was an act he refused to contemplate.

Mary lifted her veil till it shrouded her forehead like a band of mist. She drew off first one glove then the other. Next she unfolded a long foolscap sheet containing a copy of resolutions passed by the "Woman's Club" setting forth the dangers to health of permitting persons to spit on the street or in any public place. Learned authorities were quoted upon tubercular troubles to support their contentions. The petition was signed by every member of the club "and other leading citizens."

Mary explained all this as she unfolded the petition, spread it upon the desk and turned it around in his direction so that he might read for himself. She thought she could not mistake the eloquence, the pleading emotion of that noble face as he bowed his head over the paper. In her own embarrassment and self-consciousness at being alone and defenceless in a man's office, she had not observed that he had not yet spoken to her in mere words. In fact, he had a countenance so rhetorical in the gallantry of its expression that she might easily have failed to notice the absence of speech.

The Colonel, with lips tightly compressed, appeared to study the petition long and carefully. As a matter of fact, he saw not a line of it. His mind was like a rabbit running around in him this way and that, seeking a means of escape. Once he looked up stealth-

ily from beneath his brows and measured despairingly the distance between him and his handkerchief, which was a ruffled ball of still unimpeachable linen quite beyond his reach at the extreme end of the wide desk where he had carelessly tossed it during the game with the Captain. He hoped that her attention might have wandered and that he might seize it as a last resort with which to relieve a situation that the ever-increasing size of his quid was fast rendering desperate.

But Miss Yancey was regarding him steadily, with her chin resting in one white gloved hand, and with a charming refuse-me-if-you-can smile. And even at such a moment of unparalleled agony he did not fail to register the thought that if Mary was nearing forty her smile was at least ten years younger and that it became her and interpreted the still coquettish maiden spirit of her nature.

“Really, Colonel Lark, you know you are hard to convince about these new sanitary movements! You have never granted us a single concession!” she chirruped.

He wagged his head as if to imply that this should never be said of him again. But he could not return the smile. His cheeks were distended and he dared not relax his lips the hundredth part of an inch in amiability.

“And,” she went on, observing this seriousness as a sign of possible contrition, “you can find no excuse for not using your influence with the council to get

this ordinance passed. The masculine habit of expectation is horrid in itself, and it is conceded by the best authority as one of the most repulsive and frequent methods of spreading disease."

A dumb man's prayer could never have exceeded in eloquence the countenance which now faced the committee from the "Woman's Club."

"All we ask is that you impose a fine of five dollars for every offence, and that fund be used for purchasing and erecting an iron railing around our soldiers' graves in the new cemetery."

Her victim started and threatened to frown. The women of Ruckersville were crazy about their dead Missionary Ridge heroes, he reflected, but could not voice his jealousy.

"*May* we not count on you? Oh, *do* say yes!" She clasped her hands and entreated him with sweet animation.

It had come to it. He'd be damned before he would consent to such graft at the expense of a man's natural privilege with his own mouth! But for once she had the innocent opportunity of enforcing the obnoxious measure. He swallowed bravely.

"Miss Mary," he began, reaching across and imprisoning her gloved fingers between his palms in a manner so tender that a little dim, faded pink petal appeared in each cheek beneath the misty veil, "you cannot know how I feel, how ardently I desire to grant any request that you might make, but ——"

Slowly he looked at her with a smile of love and

courage languished in them, his features changed, blanched. Great beads of sweat covered them. His head fell forward upon her hands. The last thing he remembered was seeing her rise and float from her chair, hop up and down beside him like a blue pencil of June sky jumping high waves in his behalf.

How long he remained unconscious he never knew, but till the day of his death, many years later, his devoted wife maintained that if the dear Colonel had not had a "stroke" in her very presence, showing how much he needed a woman's care and devoted attention, she never could have brought herself to accept him. The Colonel himself would have died rather than reveal the truth. And he enjoyed a toleration and consideration from her accorded to few husbands. She lived in constant fear of another "stroke," to avoid which she would have suffered her right hand to be cut off, or an eye plucked out rather than cross him in the slightest manner. Nothing would induce her to even mention again the ordinance against spitting in public places, and to the deep chagrin of the "Woman's Club" it was never brought before the town council.

"The Colonel is a man of such deep feeling, such strong emotion, that I could not bear to see him agitated again as I have seen him about it," she explained to Mrs. Fanning-Rucker at the next meeting, with such an air of authority and possession that no one could have doubted her engagement even if she had not worn a superb solitaire, the only one in

Ruckersville at the time, and no less brilliant because it had been worn by the first Mrs. Lark.

Love, you understand, between a man and woman of whatever age is an air plant and thrives best upon illusions and dear deceptions, even when it is strongest and most deeply rooted in faithfulness.

CHAPTER XXI

IT MAY be easy enough to portray some imaginary conception, but nothing is more difficult than to dramatize life itself. In the imaginary situation, the author creates, owns, and controls his characters. He may say to his hero "Come!" and he cometh, with a drawn dagger if necessary to bring in the desired climax; or to the heroine "Go!" and she goeth in a manner sufficiently sensational to attract and hold the reader's attention. But in real life, God creates, and mysterious forces within themselves control men and women. The author has to do the best he can to fit the tale to their perversities and adversities, and it is like fitting a garment to a fidgety child. He is obliged to pause in the wrong place, from the standpoint of literary art, and explain a dozen circumstances to the reader that would never have occurred in an arbitrary conception. Just as everything is going smoothly and he sees the logical sequence of events rising to a proper climax, the hero packs his bag, puts on his hat, and takes the train, without giving the slightest intimation to the author as to where he is going, or whether what he is about to do will make a proper chapter in the narrative. It comes from the fact that life designed by the Great Dramatist is so

much larger and more complex in the simplest human being than the widest imagination in the creative fancy of man.

For this reason, the reader is earnestly requested to show that rare intelligence of patience from now on. My purpose is to set down as much as possible of what occurred in Ruckersville during the month of December, but it cannot be done in the proper order and form of a story. I can only tabulate with a frantic hop-skip-and-jump from one circumstance to another, seeing that not a single man or woman who figures here knew or cared whether or not he or she did the right thing to help along the tale. Each one was engaged in living according to his own notions, and being serenely unconscious that his rôle was made for him before the foundations of the world. That is the marvel of God and the secret of the reality of life. His creatures are never conscious of the real stage nor of the rise and fall of the real curtain. Therefore, the least of them acts naturally, which is a rare accomplishment in any actor. Every generation is "an all-star company," and every author, even the best, is only a poor critic of the performance, incapable by the very laws of mind of comprehending or setting down the true significance of the play.

I have said that Jim Bone had gone to New York. He remained there the first two weeks of December. Bimber met every train in person, day and night, during this period. The truth is, having seen his master board the train, he remained at the station

until his return, only withdrawing hurriedly once or twice a day to take some light refreshment from a garbage can in the back yard of Daddisman's Hotel. Otherwise, to all appearances, the life of the town went on as if Bone was a natural force to be depended upon industrially, but not bothered about personally in his absence — any more than you would infer that the sun is sick on a cloudy day. I say, to all appearances this was the case. As a matter of fact, Sylvia Story was passing through one of those periods of feminine fermentation produced in woman only by jealousy. This is a curious thing, and may be as characteristic of one sex as of the other, but it is worth noting that, while nearly all women are capable of loving their offspring, not nearly all of them are capable of loving men; whereas absolutely every one of them born into the world is capable of the most desperate jealousy. Indeed, I have no question myself that it is a matter of record among those scientific angels whose business it is to keep up with such matters for the modifying and improvement of mortals that the women least capable of loving are the most passionately jealous. This is reasonable, for they have less means of holding love, no barter in kind to exchange for it. They are mere financiers of beauty, or of any illusion which they can cast over men.

So Sylvia was consumed with jealousy because she did not know what Jim Bone was doing in New York nor why he went there. She said to herself that if she loved any one as he claimed to love her

nothing could keep her away from that person for two long inexplicable weeks. She could have remained away from him indefinitely, seeing that she did not love him, provided she were sure that he was in a state of safe preservation for her. But this hideous, outrageous absence of Mr. Bone was inexcusable. She was furious and she was miserable. Still, she went to the store of Magnis & Luster and purchased material for a handkerchief case, upon which she set to work frantically. She had not meant to give him a Christmas present; she had thought rather scornfully of the idea. It was a gentle concession of interest, you understand, that she did not need to make so long as he was so devoted without encouragement. But now she perceived that it might be best, if only, heaven help her! it was not already too late! She lifted her eyes from the envelope of blue silk she was embroidering with "J. B." and stared out of the window across the brown hill which had been so sweetly green that day when she first met him and felt the delicious strength of the man as he swung her so lightly clear of the ground. New York, she had heard, was a terrible place for women, that they were cheap there and with no notion among them of increasing in value, only glad enough to be bought and sold — some to dukes, some to magnates, some for a home, or a day's ride upon the river, and the remainder grimly packed in the cold storage of the suffrage or some other "movement" invented by the outraged hearts of unloved women, or by the ennui of idle ones, or

the morbidness of those who crave excitement, but cannot produce it for themselves.

Besides this business of making the handkerchief case and these reflections, Sylvia also made of herself a walking goddess of loveliness every afternoon, went into the town, and made it convenient to pass the railroad station about the time the south-bound train was due from New York. Sometimes she went in and inquired carefully if there were any express for her — not that she was expecting anything, but the question gave her the opportunity of being on the platform when the train stopped and dropped its passengers. On these occasions Bimber would come forward, wag his tail, lick her glove, sit down beside her, standing, knock his tail on the floor by way of continuing the conversation as he glanced up and down the long shining line of steel rails, and indicated plainly in various ways that he was in the same objective case singular with her; that, while he did not anticipate any trouble, still, it was time Mr. Bone returned to them and resumed the proper relations between master and dog, man and maid.

However, the dog had the advantage. He had no reputation to consider and could remain on the platform for the midnight train as well as for the one which passed in the afternoon. This is how it happened that he alone was present to greet Mr. Bone when he descended from the "Thelma" Pullman on the night of the fourteenth of December. They went to the hotel together, both in good spirits, Bimber detecting

no change in the silent good-fellowship of his master, only a slightly stale metropolitan odour still clinging to his handbag and trouser legs. The odour of New York is unmistakable and indescribable, as if a little innocent old-fashioned moral had decayed in it long ago and left a faint, sad smell behind.

During the week that followed, Mr. Bone was extremely busy tying all his threads and spreading the web of his purpose carefully over the entire town. That is to say, he called upon everybody, including the ladies. He congratulated Colonel Lark upon his engagement to Mary Yancey. He showed almost a paternal interest in the happiness of Mildred Percey and Tony Adams, overlooking with delightful obtuseness a slight coolness in Mildred's manner to him. He held what may be called a consultation with both Mrs. Fanning-Rucker and Mrs. Martin, the nature of which was so agreeable that each of these estimable women accompanied him to the door upon his departure, expressing appreciation for his interest and helpfulness.

"Mr. Bone," said Mrs. Fanning-Rucker, giving him a graceful complimentary pat on the arm as she bade him good afternoon, "you are the first citizen in this town to show a proper interest in the work we women are trying to do. And you may count upon the support of the U.D.C's. and the D.A.R's. and the 'Woman's Club.' The last one of us will be present!"

"Jim," said Mrs. Martin, looking at him with kindly eyes as she received a thick package of little

cards from him, "I am not the one to judge you. I can't say that your ways are my ways, but I'm bound to tell you that I feel that your plan is just a plain providence so far as 'The Cheerful Givers' is concerned. We had almost despaired of raising our collection this year. But now it will be easy. I think I can dispose of every one of these tickets to the members of our society."

"Jimmy," said Amy White, "I am so glad you have thought of it. This town needs some pleasure, more even than the women need help with their little funds for this, that, and the other. It's been years since we've had anything in our lives to correspond with the joyfulness of sunlight. We don't have enough shining in our lives. The nearest we come to diversion is during revival season, when we just get rid of our sins for the time being with the agonizing relaxation of repentance. I've often wished somebody would give a party and ask everybody, and let 'em have a good time according to nature. It wouldn't be so dangerous as some of us think if we all brought our natures along to offset one another's extravagance. The young ones could even dance a little if the old ones sat back against the wall and marked time for 'em properly. It's a real spiritual inspiration and a philanthropy that you have built that hall where everybody can go and get a little change from being just good, or just bad, by being just natural. I have sometimes feared I am not as orthodox as I ought to be, but being blind you get to see some things more

clearly than those who think with their eyes only. And it seems to me we might trust the nature the good Lord gave us more than we do. I've never known a bad man who was true to nature, nor one good enough to despise nature that was not a bit narrow and vicious."

She sat wrapped in her many-coloured great shawl, hibernating before a brightly blazing fire, smiling dimly, and fingering the card he had given her.

"It seems a pity I can't go," she went on regretfully; "but I'd never dare risk my neuralgia in the night air this time of year. I'll give my ticket to Elbert. He'll be glad to get it. He's a little pinched for money this fall, on account of some investment, he says. And I doubt if he'd have felt he could afford to go if he'd had to buy his ticket."

In spite of his expression of keen disappointment, if the old Angel could have seen the face of Mr. Bone she could not have failed to understand that he had counted upon her refusal and the ticket's reaching the exact destination she mentioned.

On Wednesday the Ruckersville *Star* appeared, with a column on the editorial page devoted to the entertainment to be given at Bone Hall the following Saturday evening "for the benefit of the various benevolent societies conducted by the ladies of Ruckersville." Upon this announcement in the opening sentences followed a long paragraph highly complimentary to "our fellow townsman, Mr. James Bone," in which was given a list of his enterprises, "not the least of

which is Bone Hall on the square. There has been much speculation as to the purpose for which this building was erected," the editor went on, "and we are glad to be the first to announce that this admirable and artistically appointed hall is practically a gift from Mr. Bone to his native city, to be used entirely for such amusements and social pleasures as the community may support and desire. A series of entertainments has already been secured by Mr. Bone during his recent absence in the metropolis to which there are none superior in the larger towns and cities of our Southland."

The concluding paragraph was in the nature of an exhortation. Everybody was urged to be present and thus give their support to a worthy enterprise undertaken by Mr. Bone solely in the interest of benevolence and with the laudable desire of affording innocent diversion to the community. Tickets were to be had in advance from various worthy ladies interested in the success of the adventure, for the merely nominal sum of twenty-five cents for adults, and fifteen cents for children. It was not known until afterward that nearly a hundred complimentary tickets were personally distributed by Mr. Bone himself, including no less than five to the pastor's family.

The word "theatre" never passed Mr. Bone's lips during his interview for the *Star*, and when the editor, who was a kind of foreigner, having lived in Atlanta, inquired with a wink if the entertainments to be given were in the nature of "plays," he spurned the idea

with so much indignation that nobody recalled till afterward that he did not really deny the implication. You may give an "entertainment" in a community where the narrowest prejudices exist against theatres and if the dialogue between the lovers is bad enough, if the acting is sufficiently wooden, nobody's conscience is offended. The strictest deacon will sit in the bald-headed row and enjoy the dreadful imitation of warmer reality.

Never, except perhaps in circus days, had there been such a crowd in Ruckersville as poured into it upon this eventful Saturday. The weather was fair and warm, beneath the leafless trees. From early-morning until night, wagons, buggies, and carriages filled with country folk rolled in. The firm of Magnis & Luster was obliged to employ an extra clerk to wait upon a continual stream of customers. The proprietor of the drug store sold thirty-two bottles of a certain fiery liniment alone, to say nothing of arnica and gum camphor. Both blacksmith shops were crowded with wagon wheels to be mended and mules to be shod. At noon the dining-room of Daddisman's Hotel could scarcely accommodate the guests, an unprecedented circumstance. The square teemed with cotton buyers, horse traders and farmers, all busy, all in a brisk good humour, all excited with anticipation of what was to come in the evening. And the whole scene was enlivened with an occasional wrestling match or a dog fight. On all other days of the week Bimber was of an exceptionally mild disposition, going about his

business of greeting Mr. Bone's friends with a polite wag of the tail and a complimentary licking out of his tongue, but on Saturdays he was subject to a sort of atmospheric intoxication. He wore his hair differently, roached to a standing crest of bristles along his neck and back, he kept his ears cocked "Sick 'em" fashion, and it annoyed him to see a strange dog from the country nosing around the corners of the pedestal upon which the statue of the Confederate hero stood, feeling that these corners were there for his own exclusive use. And he never failed to resent and to challenge any other canine who was inclined to make free with them or showed that offensive nosing curiosity often characteristic of one of your busybody hounds from the backwoods. Early every Saturday morning he made his excuses to Mr. Bone, withdrew at a brisk trot, took up his position immediately in front of the statue, and remained there till the last dog disappeared from the square in the late afternoon between the slowly revolving wheels of the last wagon. Whether he had a few bones buried under these corners, or conducted a sort of private post-office there for his own pleasure, only the other dogs knew.

The moment of greatest interest and excitement arrived when the south-bound train rolled into the station an hour behind time, as usual, and stood angrily panting and snorting off steam while a certain queer group of men and women descended from the Pullman, crowded into the 'bus and were driven at a furious pace to the hotel. Nobody knew who they were,

nor from whence they came, nor had they ever seen any other people like them. They had the air of not wishing to be seen and of not seeing any of the hundred persons who stared at them.

As the shades of night descended upon the short winter day, the square floated away in darkness. Then suddenly and for the first time the Bone Building blazed with light, and Tony Adams appeared at the ticket window in one tower, while the door of the other was flung open and disclosed a tiny cloak room with an ancient negress in it whose business it was to receive the ladies' wraps and hats. Nothing so stylish as this had ever been done in Ruckersville before. And if Mrs. Fanning-Rucker had not been the first to arrive and set the example by giving her cloak and bonnet to the white-turbaned old waitress, nobody would have known what she was there for.

By half-past seven o'clock a steady stream of people was pouring into the brilliant hall, and Tony had much ado to make change fast enough. And long before the fashionable hour of eight every seat in the house was full, and Mr. Adams took the liberty of selling standing room at ten cents a victim.

Mr. Bone had not committed the indelicacy of having reserved seats in a community where the best people were the poorest and the least able to afford the extra expense that this would have entailed upon that portion of the audience which he desired should sit nearest the footlights. He knew very well that nature manages a crowd in this particular where

no artificial barrier of dollars and cents interferes. Your aristocrat will always go the entire length and take a front seat, even if he is an atheist, in the very house of God. It is his instinct for heading the column, for leading the charge, for being in at the death. And your other kind who are not aristocrats and who are not rendered gross in consciousness by a sense of prosperity will always drop down in the first seat he comes to even if he is a saint in a strange church. It is a delicacy he has, a natural modesty for sitting in the "lower room" until somebody finds that he has a dead and forgotten honourable cavalier ancestor and is also entitled to join the company higher up. So, then, the audience could not have been better seated for Mr. Bone's purpose and amusement if Puck himself had been the usher. I have neglected to say that Jim himself had a seat in the wings at the extreme right of the stage, and commanded a view of the whole house from a slit in the folds of the curtain.

This curtain was a deep red and was decorated in the centre with a wreath of flying Cupids, with drawn bows, each aiming, with that expression of idiotic glee often observed upon the insipid features of Cupids, at a young woman in the middle of the wreath who appeared to be nearly distracted in her efforts to escape, and who was not so entirely clad as she should have been in the presence of a Ruckersville audience.

"Husband," said Mrs. Martin, nudging the Captain and turning her face sideways with an abashed look at the Cupids, "I wish Jim had taken some good woman's

advice before he selected the furnishings for his hall. Them figures up there in that curtain smack terribly to me of the world and its ways.”

“They ain’t a bit worse to look at than that picture in our big Bible at home of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba courting on the front steps of his harem!” retorted the Captain with a logic that was as sound as it was misleading.

Mrs. Martin was relieved mentally, but spiritually she was uneasy. She had the feeling that she was about to have too good a time, that there was something wrong about a woman of her age and a Christian with an example to set, sitting down point-blank in front of a lot of naked Cupids tormenting a girl who was evidently shamed at not being better dressed herself. However, she took comfort as she looked up and down the long rows of faces in front and behind and to the side of her, among whom she recognized every church member in the town, even to the pastor and his wife and her sister and their two children. If you are a saint, you feel much better about doing wrong if all the other saints do it with you. Mrs. Martin could not have believed such a thing of herself, but morally she was in the same plight as one of those school children who, all together and never singly, play truant on the first day of April. Doubtless the good God has seen many such an April fool trick played by his saints, and doubtless He knows how to bear with such innocent transgressions as any good teacher would know — not too severely, you

understand, not with the quick rod of His displeasure, but gently, like a shower at the stolen April picnic; or maybe He will keep His elder children "in" some day with an extra lesson to learn, a little scripture of mercy to commit to practice. We need not worry. We do not escape the great vigilance of Him. He has a system of education for us that not only allows for our "April fool" days off, but that turns these very days to account. Mrs. Martin had a conceit for righteousness that needed singeing. After this night she was destined never again to be able to deal so severely with the "carnal mind" in others. It had been coming for some time, this chastening; now she was to get it in full measure. "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." This is why some obtuse persons often mistake them for mortal blunders.

CHAPTER XXII

AT THIS moment there was a flutter in the audience, literally a flutter, occasioned by two little lads who moved up and down the aisles distributing programmes. This was followed by a singular, concentrated silence as each person read and studied the tiny folder. Elbert White, who had experienced some difficulty in adjusting his spectacles, was the last to discover, imbedded between advertisements of the Ruckersville Granite Quarry and the Broad River Power Company, these words in fearfully tall type:

THE RECORDING ANGEL

Act I.

Tableau. The Angel

Scene i. Bilfire's Saloon

Scene ii. Office of Daddisman's Hotel

Act II.

Scene i. Meeting of Woman's Club

Scene ii. Before the Post Office

Act III.

Scene i. The Workmen and the Angel

Scene ii. Cupid and the Angel

Act IV.

Scene i. The Town Square

Scene ii. Merry Maidens

Before any one could recover from the shock of reading this emblematic prospectus of the evening's entertainment, the music began — strains as sedate as a church hymn and as slowly woven into melody. There was not a man or woman present who did not recall "The Town Testament," and who did not feel that creepy sensation one may have when about to see his own ghost instead of some other less nearly related apparition.

The spiritualists are doing a great work along this line, adding a new and vapoury cubit to the superstitions of man. We have long had powers of illusion sufficiently developed to see the other fellow's ghost, but when we become so diseased physically as to see our own shade wandering accusingly in our bedtime darkness we shall have received a moral impetus to better deeds and more of them in all probability.

Ruckersville had been secretly alarmed and tormented for some months by the revelations of its accurately impersonated virtues and vices. And it was with a sigh of genuine relief that many of its citizens discovered that the last copy of the *Monthly Mercury* contained no instalment of "The Town Testament." Now it appeared that this only meant that these revelations were to be dramatized in their very midst.

The programme trembled like a crackling leaf in Elbert's hands. The type danced before his distracted eyes. The thin aigrette of white hair above his forehead stood erect with horror.

“Who in hell has been meddling with my business, anyhow?” He lifted his eyes and glared around. But Mr. Bone was nowhere to be seen.

“Husband,” said Mrs. Martin weakly, “I feel that this is no place for a Christian woman. Let’s go home!”

“Be quiet!” hissed the Captain through his clenched teeth, his goatee working convulsively and his eyes snapping. “I’ll see this thing through, and if there is the slightest reflection in it upon you, I’ll kill somebody!”

“Reflection on *me!*” exclaimed his wife; “that is impossible. I’ve never been in Bilfire’s saloon! And serves them right that have even if they are exposed here to-night!” she concluded indignantly, settling herself with the air of a person who is ready and willing to see justice done, let the chips fall where they may.

At this moment some one turned the wicks of the chandelier lamps low. The music died away, and the curtain rolled up.

In the background, lined against an extremely clear, starlit sky, was the figure of an immense angel, clad with six splendid wings after the manner of the seraph described in Isaiah’s dream. The head and lower part of the face were hooded in some misty whiteness. A very strong blue light concentrated upon it and supplied the pallor with which we are accustomed to think of these strange beings. But the thrilling circumstance connected with the apparition was the fact that he was not writing in any absent-minded

way in the enormous book which lay open and mysteriously supported before him; but with eyes of magnetic intensity his gaze travelled from one face to another in the audience, remaining fixed for a hurriedly disconcerting moment each time before he made his note.

Nothing could have been more gross or crassly devised. But in this lay the success of Mr. Bone's idea. Ruckersville was not artistic: The people there had never heard the expression of *Deus ex machina*. But they had the exquisitely morbid self-consciousness of those who have heard many sermons on judgment and damnation.

The sweat was standing out upon more than one brow as the curtain slowly descended.

It is not my purpose to describe in detail the scenes which followed. The play was evidently "The Town Testament" dramatized, and rendered even more veracious in action. The first two acts were entirely historical and intimately biographical. And it is certain that if Elbert had taken liberties with Amy's scriptures, Mr. Bone's playwright had interpolated even more. The scene in Bilfire's saloon, for example, was far beyond Amy's power to imagine. But the audience recognized every idle man in the town in the twinkling of an eye after the curtain lifted, not merely by their singular resemblance, but by their manner of action and speech. The first roar of laughter swept over the audience when a thin, old man in the group around a table in the saloon arose,

balanced himself with one hand upon the table, and began to explain how he came to be shot in the back, where no gentleman should receive his wound.

It was fortunate that the lamps in the chandeliers had been turned low, but there was much craning of necks, and the darkness was illumined in part by the smiling faces about the Captain and his wife.

The scene lasted a long time, and, first and last, the audience heard repeated every incident of importance connected with the history of Ruckersville. But it was not until the curtain arose the second time and the same static state of reminiscent existence was again enacted by the same company of loafers that an uneasy sensation went through the house and settled into the conviction that this "entertainment" was a satire upon the languor and shiftlessness of a people who lived too much to brag of a noble ancestry and too little in imitation of the said ancestors. This scene in the office of Daddisman's Hotel represented a meeting of the town council, and certain circumstances extremely private concerning the appropriation of fees and distribution of municipal taxes were humorously but ruthlessly exposed, as was the demijohn beneath the counter upon which the guests' register rested. Colonel Lark, who sat by Mary Yancey, was furious, but managed to control himself when Mary sought his hand and held it throughout the painful and offensive scene.

An audience with more spirit in expressing its composite emotions might have created some disturbance,

but the comedians took no liberties with facts. Every speech was a literal quotation from one or another distinguished citizen. And there were too many witnesses to this for the victim to confess himself in resentment. Moreover, the women had entered into the spirit of the performance, and showed their sympathy and appreciation by a sort of perpetual cackle of feminine laughter. Therefore, no man dared challenge their wit directly to himself by getting up and going out.

“Serves ’em right, the lazy things!” snickered Mrs. Magnis, nudging Mrs. Luster and wagging her head at Captain Martin, who sat severely erect, as if he had been frozen stiff by his double upon the stage.

Elbert had slowly disappeared, only the top of his head shining in the dim light, his face haggard, and his eyes protruding with horror. He was thinking of how he could keep the nature of this devilish entertainment from Amy, and of what the consequences would be if she should learn the truth. Clark Story sat beside Sylvia, artlessly interested, and recognizing his neighbours with delighted ejaculations at his own perspicuity, but never tracing the slightest resemblance between himself and a certain feeble, old visionary who sustained a sort of antiphony relation to the other greater persons in the scene. Sylvia herself was engaged with one idea only, that of finding Jim Bone. Meanwhile, Mr. Bone, seated upon a tall stool, observed her constantly through the slit in the curtain. He wondered at her lack of interest. He would make

up his mind later whether the fault was in Sylvia or in the play itself. Now he was too intent upon his purpose of giving the citizens of Ruckersville the opportunity of seeing themselves as others saw them, and of calculating the effect of his adventure in the varying expressions dimly discerned upon the faces of those nearest the stage.

But if the women had enjoyed themselves at the expense of the men in the first act, the tables were turned in the second, and the house rocked with roars of masculine mirth when the first scene of this act disclosed a meeting of the "Woman's Club" with such diablerie of detail that nothing of all their affairs remained secret, from the caucusing with which they elected and excluded each other, to the plans they discussed for improving the men, but never the children. This taking of the bull by the horns, instead of holding the calf by the tail, was as shrewdly intimated as if Dickens had drawn a sketch of long-distance maternity for the comedians. Mrs. Fanning-Rucker sat with her old face flattened into a mechanical smile, opera glasses raised by way of indicating her unconsciousness of the cause of the amusement about her. Mildred Percey blushed furiously when she discovered that the scene before the post office began with the coming in of the various lady authors of Ruckersville with voluminous manuscripts to mail, and progressed as a dramatized criticism upon the absurdity and unreality of these same manuscripts. The thing was very woodenly done, much exaggerated, the women

thought, but, for the purpose in hand, it was effectively demonstrated that Ruckersville was a funny sort of dead crater of literary inspiration.

Mr. Bone had not concerned himself with any consideration for the harmony of dramatic art in having "The Town Testament" dramatized. Therefore, if the first two acts were historical, the last two were allegorical. The Angel reappeared and remained now constantly in the background. Apparently the spirit of life had changed in the town. There was a new order of things which the audience was given to understand by the much more agreeable expression of the Angel. There was a moving scene of workmen, the climax of which appeared to be the breaking of ground for the Bone Building; and a crowded scene full of animation on the square under conditions of prosperity, brought on, the audience was left to infer, by numerous recent enterprises and industries, and more particularly by a more cheerful anticipation of the mere joys of life. Never did a man describe so complete a circle in rude dramatic art to get a compliment to himself and to the vindication of his own point of view.

The romantic passion, in particular, received astonishing emphasis in every scene now. Lovers appeared at every angle and in all the spare places in the drama. Courtship from the first incipient glance was portrayed with enthusiasm in every stage. And the climax, if there could be said to be a climax to such a performance, was in next to the last scene, when

some of the easily recognized older people appeared to withdraw into a sort of blessing attitude in the background while the front of the stage was given over to a series of innocent but ardent courtships.

And for the sake of my own views upon the subject of ballet and ballet dancers (holding, as I do, that this form of amusement is only suitable for young children to look at and enjoy), I wish that I might say that the play of "The Recording Angel" ended here. Certainly Mr. Bone had given the community a number of salutary shocks in the course of the evening and could have well afforded to leave out the closing feature, that was a scandal and an outrage of which you may hear to this day in Ruckersville. In setting it down here you will understand that I am far from defending or approving of Jim Bone's conduct.

Just as everybody in the audience was wondering what would happen next, the music began a lively, flirting, kicking tune, and twenty figures, each clad only in pink tights and a series of very full pin ruffles that reached not nearly to their knees, and bodices cut very low, whirled upon the stage, and described the motions of a flight of butterflies that had suddenly been reduced to leg flights instead of wing flutterings. There was a moment of breathless silence during which those unspeakably pretty little pink beings showed what they could do to improve the audience's opinion of the suppleness of the human body by presenting first one phase of it, then another, for their consideration. Then there was a rousing

yell of delight from the back part of the house, where there was no less than a hundred young farmers and hill-billies who had bought standing room and were now making the best of it by pounding upon the floor with two hundred feet. The pretty pink beings responded by shaking all the curls on their heads at them. This brought on more yells and a loud beating upon the boards. Never on election nights or at any other time had there been such an unparalleled "demonstration."

Suddenly in the midst of the uproar some one screamed. The lights were instantly turned up, and it was seen that Mrs. Alexander Rucker-Martin had fainted. In an agonized moment the blessed relief of unconsciousness had overtaken her. It was not only that she refused to receive the impression of pink legs upon the retina of her eyeballs; it was that she could not fail to observe that the Captain was more than willing to receive them. And even as the curtain went down upon the disgraceful exhibition, and the Captain, assisted by Elbert White, bore his senseless spouse down the aisle, it was observed by all that the Captain still smiled fatuously and happily.

I say, I make no excuse for this feature of an otherwise instructive occasion. I deplore it. Still, there is this extenuating circumstance: If we remained as the Creator designed us and left us, we should all be in costumes of even less material than that worn by any ballet dancer. And to my mind it is an open question whether innocency or vice invented the first

petticoat. Modesty is a thing we have had to acquire, but it is not a virtue. It is a drapery.

Naturally, Mr. Bone never again got a "full house." The lines were drawn, and those particular saints who have everywhere left the theatre to be debauched in their absence refused to attend any more plays in Bone Hall. If they could have got their consent to go back, they might have by the force of their demands been instrumental in eliminating the ballet. As it was, this dance and these dancers became a feature of the place. And all the young people, besides many older ones, were in constant attendance there during the winter which followed. It was not that they were vicious, but, deriving amusement, and having no better standard, to them the ballet typified what they had so far missed in life, a whimsical, joyful expression in motion of youth, beauty, and happiness.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Sabbath following upon this memorable Saturday night was a singularly holy one in Ruckersville. Up to the hour of church services you could have heard a pin drop in the town, figuratively speaking. It may be that the inhabitants slept later than usual, owing to the dissipation of the previous evening. It may be that they were licking the wounds of their souls in their closets. Men are like dogs in some particulars. Stricken in body, they make a noise, groan and send for the doctor; but when they have been spanked on the spirit, they are apt to withdraw from the public gaze until such a time as their mind heals them with the bravado of self-righteousness or some other of the many panaceas provided by the nature of him for this beneficent purpose. In any case, I say that at nine o'clock on this Sunday morning the sun and the statue to the heroes in gray had the streets of Ruckersville all to themselves. Bimber was the only pedestrian visible, and he was not walking. He sat upon the sidewalk in front of Daddisman's Hotel, with his tail at full length upon the pavement behind him, his nose up, and he was sniffing the air as if he detected a change in it. Dogs are not intelligent and, therefore, they are keener than

merely rational beings at recognizing psychic effects by smelling the wind. Bimber did not understand, but he perceived a difference in his native place, and slowly, meditatively, he made a tail note of the same by slapping that member in a kind of commentary whisper upon the ground, like a philosopher who talks to himself.

About half-past ten o'clock, however, the people began to issue from their homes, and then it appeared that every man, woman, son, and daughter in the town was bound for the church. Never, even in revival season, had so large a congregation assembled there. The expressions upon the faces of it were mixed, some humorous, some openly smiling, many sadly cast down. As for Brother Ellis himself, he conducted himself with a wisdom that any serpent might have admired and with a gentleness that would have broken the heart of a dove with envy. On the previous evening, at the first sight of the ballet, he had risen from his seat, walked down the aisle of Bone Hall with his head down like a man suddenly attacked with nosebleed. He was followed by his entire family, only the children looking back over their shoulders, delighted and fascinated by the beautiful dancers, but dragged, each by the hand of his parents, from the sight of the scandalous spectacle. Now, however, he entered the church and advanced to the pulpit with the air of a man who knows by the pangs of his own spirit that the world is full of snares and pitfalls for the unwary, but who has got a victory over his

wrath concerning this circumstance, and is resolved to hurt no man's feelings. After the opening hymns and prayer he arose with chastened dignity, turned a few leaves in the great Bible, and took the breath out of his congregation by choosing this text, which he read in a manner high and remote:

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, if there be any praise, think on these things!”

The sermon that followed was one of the best ever heard in that church, and the most ingenuous minded could not have inferred a reference to the events of the preceding night. Really, it was either a moral triumph or a begging of the question altogether, according to the way you want to look at it, and according to how much you know of the ways of preachers when the devil gets them in a tight place. My own impression of them is that they do the best they can, being often handicapped by a creed which prevents them from taking the bull by the horns and trusting God to keep them from being gored to death for such courage. If you stick just to homiletics, it is not difficult to conduct a church service. But it is so much more difficult to conduct men and women in the way they should go that few preachers have the hardihood to risk it. This is why Brother Ellis, after the opening of Bone Hall, never preached against

theatre-going by name, seeing that many of his members, especially of the younger generation, perjured themselves in their church vows every week by attending the "entertainments" given there. The same silence may be observed in other preachers in this same church. They are in a bad fix. They cannot afford to turn out all the defalcating members, and they have not the moral courage to demand a sensible revision of their creed. Neither should they be too much blamed for this timidity. We have not yet the intelligence to evolve a faith which would enable a righteous man to admit the error in his confession of faith or in his creed, thus giving the sneering world the "drop" on him, while he trusts God to bring the sneering world to its errors on its repentant knees. There is probably no class of men in our times so deserving of respect and sympathy as ministers of the gospel, befuddled by modern conditions.

With rare delicacy in one so highly endowed with ruthless humour and the unexpurgated courage of carnal manhood, Jim Bone absented himself from church service on this Sunday. It was not that he dreaded what might happen, but he had a snickering, boyish compassion for the saints he had so outraged the night before, and was unwilling to increase their indignation by the sight of himself until he had done what he could to appease their wrath.

He succeeded better in accomplishing this than might have been hoped, on the following day. He

had cheerfully paid out of his own pocket the expenses of the little company of actors who had undertaken to give his play between their engagements in some of the Southern cities. But the actual gate receipts, which amounted to nearly two hundred dollars, he divided equally between the various benevolent funds conducted by the women of Ruckersville, and accompanying each check was a personal note couched in terms at once grateful for their support and complimentary of their enterprises. And, most seductive of all, he assured them that a certain per cent. of the proceeds earned by the Hall above expenses would from time to time be transferred to them to augment these same excellent funds, without which the town of Ruckersville would soon become as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals, or words to that effect.

A certain old French woman, of more or less reprehensible character, once said, "When tempted, yield at once and avoid the struggle!" Mrs. Martin was sadly in need of this cynical advice on the day that she received Mr. Bone's flattering letter enclosing the check for seventy-five dollars for "The Cheerful Givers" fund. She was a woman who would not look upon wine when it is red, nor when it worketh itself aright in the cup, to put the adamant nature of her resistive virtues figuratively. Still, the treasury of her fund was woefully depleted. If she sent the check back to Jim Bone, he would doubtless use it for some reprehensible purpose. Such was her impression of his character. After a season of prayer and meditation,

she sighed like a wrestler who has been outdone by his good angel, and resolved to keep it, thus sanctifying it to good service. At the same time, she determined never to set foot of hers into Bone Hall again, nor in any way countenance that enterprise. We are all very funny, cock-eyed creatures morally, with the tadpole tails of original sin still dangling from our best intentions. Mrs. Martin's conduct exactly resembled that of so many excellent persons noted for their charities and good works who derive their income from an interest in the liquor traffic or in a railroad that practises the rebate system or a mine where men suffer and die from stinginess and bad conditions. It's no use to turn up our noses at Mrs. Martin. The stone we might cast at her ought to shatter our own window-pane.

Meanwhile, time was passing. Christmas was at hand, and Sylvia, who was never absent from Jim's thoughts, became paramount in his consideration. Women do not understand such self-control, but a man desperately in love can set his passion aside any time long enough to attend brilliantly to his other real business in life. This is what Bone had done. He settled it in his own mind that so soon as he had his affairs in shape and the Bone Hall going smoothly, he would take up this affair with Sylvia and work it to a finish no matter what it cost him. He had never wavered in his determination to marry her, once he yielded the struggle and consented to his passion. The only question was how he should manage

not mention this circumstance if it were not the last sight the reader will have of him in this tale. Whether he caught the rabbit, whether he lived happy ever after, I leave those nature fakirs to tell who know so much more about dogs and other animals than they can prove.

The other occurrence was of far more value, and it is the scent we shall follow—that is to say, the sight; for at the same moment the dog raced off Jim saw the figure of a woman approaching from the direction of the house, a sort of feminine redbird, flaming against the snow on the opposite side of the fence, with the hospitable gap in its ribs between the lower rail and the top rail. He recognized Sylvia in spite of the hood that covered her head and partly shadowed her face. Indeed, it seemed to him that for the first time he beheld her in her native plumage, red, all red, lilting along, with the wind catching like a lover at the flaunting tails of her cloak, as if it were striving to detain her, to get at the pretty kernel within. And she, with the woman's grace of sanctity, was buffeting against these liberties, drawing the garment close about her tightly till she came like a slim flame, bending far forward in the gusty evening air, which still held stray flakes of snow that lightly powdered her as she came.

He quickened his pace, but when Sylvia reached the steps and was about to bend and swing herself through the opening she paused in mid air, so to speak, having at this moment caught sight of him, and so

stood motionless, like a little glowing blaze in calm weather, straight up, leaning neither to the right nor the left.

Jim laughed. He was about to enter upon the most delightful moment in any man's life, and the most exquisite in any woman's, and he knew it, for himself, at least. He was coming to the finish of the chase. Joyful consideration, it was to be in the open, where all such chases should begin and end. Presently he was to know the inestimable satisfaction of holding her in his arms and setting the seal of his claim forever upon her lips. He was not the man to doubt this. And if he had been, it was foreshadowed in the sweet alarm of Sylvia's eyes, wide and startled with the dark brows spreading above like a swallow's wings in flight, as she beheld him striding toward her through the unbroken snow, heard him laugh, saw his face glowing with triumphant animation.

"Where are you going, Mistress Red Riding Hood?" he called while yet some distance away.

It was as if he had granted her a short reprieve, as if he had said, "We will play a little before we come to terms." Her face twinkled into a change. Some vanishing quality of the little girl reappeared in it, as she took her cue and answered, out of the old nursery tale:

"To carry these things to my grandmother, sir!"

"Meaning Miss Amy?" he questioned, seeing now for the first time a small basket hidden beneath the folds of her long cape.

"Yes," answered Sylvia. "It is a Christmas gift."

"Where is mine?" he demanded.

"I have not thought of it!" she sweetly lied, looking at him with that singular innocence any woman may command upon occasion.

"I have," he rejoined; "I have chosen it."

"Indeed! I hope you will not be disappointed," she intimated.

"I shall not!" he retorted, with smiling assurance, and with a look so fraught with meaning that Sylvia's cheeks bloomed redder than her hood.

He stood waiting the distance of a few yards from the fence.

"Come on, I am going with you!" he announced.

"That is not the way the story ran in my book!" she corrected, smiling.

"You mean that the wolf cut through the short way, ate up the grandmother, and covered up head and ears in her bed before little Mistress Red Riding Hood got there, being delayed by some blossoms on the way?"

She nodded, then delivered this sage commentary upon that heroine of the nursery tale.

"Besides, I've always thought that if she'd gone directly back home when she first saw the wolf she would have been saved a very trying experience."

"Right you are, darling," he answered, boldly; "but you see she didn't go back. She walked straight ahead into that 'experience.' It is the nature of all

Red Riding Hoods, of whatever age, that they do that way."

He stooped kindly to cover her confusion from his gaze and began to rake the snow from the ground at his feet and to pat it into a soft ball. Then he stood up, saw that his shot had gone home by the pretty pallor of indignation which hid the roses now in her cheeks like a very light fall of snow upon damask blossoms.

He squinted, took aim at the tassel fluttering on top of her head in the wind, flung the ball and flattened it into a red and white puff.

This was too much temptation for the coquetry in any woman. Instantly she set down her basket, swept the snow from the top rail, squeezed it in her glove palms and aimed her ball with that funny flapping winged motion women have mastered when they cast a stone. The little wad flew wide of its mark, but the mischief was done. The man had secured the challenge he desired, and he made delicious, furious haste to avail himself of it. Seizing a handful of snow, he started for Sylvia with straddling leaps. She turned and fled, experiencing that genuine alarm a woman always feels after she has inveigled a man into chasing her, whether in a lover's conversation or in an open meadow. Her lips were parted like a red rose in bloom, her eyes were wide and shining with fright, as she looked back over her shoulder and saw him swing through the gap between the rails of the fence. The skirt of her cape waved back and up and down in the

wind like the wings of a bird. She had no time to choose her path. She flew down a short incline between the white breasts of two hills. The snow lay deep in the hollow. She hesitated before thrusting her foot into it, and was lost. She felt her cape caught from behind, then all was over; or, rather, life had begun again, new and strangely sweet. Standing ankle deep in the drift, he clasped her, held her with her hands tightly pinned behind her in one of his. For one moment their eyes met; she turned her face and hid it against his breast. It may have been that she wished to avoid the handful of snow with which he still threatened her; it may have been because even the boldest woman is abashed at the first blinding flash of love in a man's face. In any case, she could not escape the one nor the other. Slowly he turned her this way and that, let go his hold upon her hands so that she fought with them valiantly, but in vain. He held her head against his heart, and she heard it pounding even through his great coat. He lifted her face with the fingers of the same hand under her chin, with the other he administered the snow. He took his time, cooled the scarlet of each cheek, made her brow flame, dusted her adorable nose, and left a little in each wing-curved brow. It was as if he said to himself that he would kiss his rose with the dew upon it. The kiss itself was the conclusion of the whole matter. Sylvia bore it as a tamed filly bears the shock of a saddle flung across her back.

“Now you are mine!” he said, lifting her out of the

drift to the higher ground, "and we are to be married soon."

"But, Jim," answered Sylvia, not disputing that saying, "what were you doing so long in New York?"

"In New York?" He had forgotten that he had ever been to New York in the concentration of his mind upon the present moment.

"Oh, you mean week before last." He recalled the circumstance with difficulty. "Why, I don't remember what I did exactly. Spent most of my time dickering with the manager of a third-class theatrical troupe. Why?"

"Jim," said Sylvia, standing before him and gazing at him with the honourable inquisition stare of a virtuous woman about to open the very secret chamber of his dead man's bones; "Jim," she reiterated solemnly, "did you select those girls for that dance?"

"Never saw one of 'em in my life till they appeared here on the stage that night!"

"Nor any of the others?"

"Not one of 'em?" he swore candidly, and then, laughing, drew her to him for another kiss.

"I believe you are jealous!" he accused.

"Oh, no!" she protested, "only I wanted to make sure that you loved me."

"You mean *only* you?"

"Yes!"

"Well, I do, darling. I never so much as looked at a woman before, unless it was to notice what poor creatures most of them are!"

“You think so?” she said, mightily gratified.

“I know it. I never could bear any woman, in this way, I mean, till I saw you.”

“And I imagined that ——” she hesitated.

“What?” he smiled.

“That you’d had lots of experience with women.”

“There is where you were mistaken, Sylvia. A man like me is just virgin soil when it comes to love and feelings of that sort.”

She looked at him as if she doubted it—as indeed she did—but hoped so, as she would be bound to do the rest of her life. A slender faith which was to stand alone between her and the only sorrow she was capable of the rest of her life.

The day was ending in a ghostly twilight, yellow rimmed with snow clouds, against which the setting sun cast its rays.

“Now we must be going on, or Miss Amy will be disappointed of her gift,” he said.

Then Sylvia did a thing so adorable that one could only regret that it totally misrepresented the real inspiration which led to it.

They had reached the fence once more, hand in hand. She bent and took from the basket a little package, very flat and soft, wrapped in fine paper, stamped and addressed to “Mr. James Bone, Ruckersville, Ga.” She offered it shyly, saying as she did so:

“But you mustn’t open it until to-morrow. It is your Christmas present. I was going to mail it.”

He was overcome. She had really thought of him

then? She nodded, turning away her head. He took the package reverently, kissed it, thrust his hand into his pocket, took out a knife, opened it, ran the blade beneath the cord and clipped it before she knew what he was about.

“But you must not open it until morning!” she protested, trying to snatch it from him.

He paused and looked at her reproachfully.

“I hope you don’t think I could wait fourteen hours to see the first thing you ever did for me, Sylvia. I’d not sleep a wink to-night. I’d be half dead with the strain and suspense by morning.”

He resumed the business of unwrapping. He peeled off the brown outer cover, he showed increasing excitement as he tore off the white tissue paper inside; and when at last he came to a curious flimsy blue silk envelope of enormous size with his initials embroidered upon it, he was speechless with amazement for a moment as he dangled it from his thumb and forefinger.

“What, in God’s name, is it, Sylvia?” His tone was low and charged with deep respect.

“Why, don’t you know?” she laughed. “It’s a handkerchief case!”

“Forgive me, darling,” he cried, crushing it shamefully as he again folded her in his arms and kissed her.

“You see, no one ever did such things for me. I never had a gift from a woman before!”

His manner implied an innocency of such benefits that was almost pathetic.

And it was a fact which he made a note of at the moment that, before this, the women he had known received gifts with a greed that could not be satisfied, but they never made any in return. He concluded, and with proper reasoning, that this was the difference between good women and the other kind: they gave all they were and all they could think and all they could do for the one man whom they loved.

In the face of these reflections it would have been a cruel shock if he had known how narrowly he had escaped not having any gift at all from Sylvia.

As they trudged along the road, blissfully silent for a time, Sylvia returned to the subject of all women's overwhelming anxiety even in the midst of overwhelming joy.

"Jim," she said, "will you *always* love me exactly as you do now?"

"My darling," he replied in an agony of eloquent devotion, "the stars may fall, the skies cease to rain, the seeds to spring, the sun to shine, but I'll never change to you, so much as the lack of one kiss! I'll kiss you ten thousand times a day if you'll let me!"

"No," she murmured sagely; "three times will do!"

"I've lived for nothing else since the first moment I set eyes upon you," he went on, not noticing that singularly accurate estimate of married caresses. "It has been my occupation. I couldn't stop!"

She sighed, not so much with contentment, as with the feeling of sadness that she had got all the love he could give, and that there was no more to be had.

Never once had she declared her own for him, never once had she even thought of it. And this is a queer circumstance: so long as she should be able to keep her lover in love with her, so long as she belonged thus to him, he himself would overlook this detail. A man infinitely more enjoys loving a woman than he enjoys having her love him. The latter entails a sort of bondage, a walking softly before her altar, to him both embarrassing and exasperating at times. If a woman desires to insure absolutely a man's happiness, let her cultivate more her own lovableness, and place, at least to him, as little emphasis as possible upon her devotion to him.

"Jimmy," said Amy, half an hour later as the two sat beside her, having disclosed their secret and received her blessing full measure, "Jimmy, I am sorry the entertainment was such a failure. Elbert says the people weren't satisfied at all, and that nobody likes to talk about it even. But you mustn't be discouraged. Your heart is in the right place and I hope you will hold on to your idea of having this a place of innocent amusement. You can't expect to succeed at once. People have to be educated to any change in their ways."

"That's all right, Miss Amy," replied Jim, delighted with the way Elbert had managed their predicament with the old Angel. "I am doing my best to educate 'em. And I don't entirely despair of results."

CHAPTER XXIV

MANY changes took place in Ruckersville during the next few months. The projected cotton factory was actually begun, and not with Northern capital, as is usually the case with so-called Southern enterprises, which accounts more than anything else for some inhuman and abusive features of these industries that have often rendered them the curse rather than the benefit of the communities where they spring up. I refer to the enslaving of children and the impoverishing of the people both morally and physically. The part the native plays in them is usually that of the worker, not the owner. He performs the labour, gets the tuberculosis, reaps the desolation and hardships, while the Northern or Eastern capitalist gets the profits, and returns the same with a philanthropic strut in an occasional donation to a negro school or maybe a library building. And the blame of this arrangement rests no less upon the devilishly enterprising capitalists than it does upon the shiftless, short-visioned Southerners who not only permit but seek this method of destroying themselves. The former are a set of highly acquisitive, admirably ethical rogues trained in the conscienceless school of finance. And we, the latter, are merely simple-

hearted fools with an avarice for nickels instead of dollars.

But the Ruckersville cotton factory differed from most of these factories in that it was being built (on a modest scale, to be sure) by a stock company composed of the citizens of the town, headed by Jim Bone. Captain Martin had given up the idea of selling his residence for a horse collar factory, and was now offering it to the D. A. R's. and the U. D. C's. as a museum for relics of the Confederacy and those of the Revolutionary period, but still at a price so exorbitant that he was likely to live and die in it without obtaining a purchaser. An influx of undesirable citizens, from the aristocratic point of view, was noticeable in the town, but these brought trade and a new spirit of enterprise, being of that class of foolish Americans who are bent upon being the progenitors of the aristocrats of the future by laborious acquisition of fortunes in this generation. The fact is, we do not seem able to escape this flaming cockerel of humanity. If we are not descended from one, we are apt to beget one if we are thrifty enough to insure him a life of leisure and extravagance. The only influence in our times which is hostile to the future production of aristocrats is the Universal Peace Movement. Personally, I do not see how it can succeed without resulting in those bed sores peculiar to a too peaceful civilization and which only the cauterization of war eliminates. But if it does succeed, your aristocrat will become an obsolete animal like the mastodon and the minstrels and the trouba-

dours. For you cannot produce a Simon-pure aristocrat without endowing him at least with the hope of using his sword either in a duel or in a war. Otherwise, he is apt to become one of those superfluous beings who spend their money and impudence in riding over people in ten-thousand-dollar limousines, a type we have already manufactured and of which all honourable persons are heartily ashamed. And your Hague conferences can do nothing to eliminate him. The fact is, he himself can buy up a summer hotel, and enjoy the distinction of having an entire Peace Conference for his guests. And very exclusive affairs these would be too, composed of the most ruthless millionaires, provided they are interested in "Peace," but not open to any mangy walking delegate of the belligerent people outraged by the millionaire's financial tactics for preserving peace. Peace is a much bigger thing than can be had by merely breeching cannons and disbanding armies. It is more an internal and eternal question of a fair deal between man and man, especially the rich man and the poor man. This is a point the Universal Peace movers may comprehend in a thousand years or so. Meanwhile, we may as well go on with this story, which is nearly ended.

During April of this year, following upon the events I have already recorded, the air of Ruckersville was sweetened and rendered especially musical not only by the droning of bees, but by the chimes of wedding bells. No less than three marriages occurred there in this month. This is as it should be. April is the bri-

dal month of nature. No two flowers blooming side by side in the meadow that do not mix their pollen in wedded love. No two wrens that are not inspired by the sight of one another to carry straws and feathers together to the same private cornice beneath the eaves of some old house. There is not an oak in the forest that does not shake its green beard lovingly in the wind to the next oak. The very earth makes itself the garlanded bride of the sun. So, I say, Mildred Percey and Tony Adams were married, first, and they were still away on their wedding tour to Niagara Falls when Colonel Lark purchased tickets for himself and his bride to the same destination. In those days, Niagara Falls was the Mecca of all bridal couples. Last, toward the May end of the month, Sylvia Story and Jim Bone plighted their troth before the chancel of the old church, the last wedding to be solemnized there before the building was torn down. It was a great occasion, owing, as the *Star* so happily put it, "to the prominence of the contracting parties." And I wish I might take the space to set down all the fragrant details, but time presses, and all true love weddings are much alike. You will think, in passing, of Jim in a perfectly fitting Prince Albert coat and pearl-gray trousers, wearing a white satin puff tie and getting very much excited during the ceremony with his effort to put the ring on the bride's proper finger; and of Sylvia, all in white, with a veil falling over her bright head like April mist with the sun shining through it. Never mind whether they lived happy ever after.

That is not your affair. It is a matter between them and their children now and the community where they made their home. They are still living in Ruckersville, but you would never recognize the prosperous middle-aged couple they have grown to be for these bright young things I have tried to portray in this story. And if you did recognize them, it would be with a pang of disappointment. We are not very sensible about appreciating the sturdy growth of love after marriage. This is why authors usually end the story with the wedding bells, or sneak beyond it only to dramatize the death of love with some kind of neurasthenic provender of a diseased imagination. We can only thank God that a larger per cent. of lovers remain constant to one another through all the disillusioning hardship of married life than writers of mere fiction would lead us to believe, or even the statistics of divorce courts.

One other incident only remains to be set down here as an example of the wonderful and beautiful faith of a good woman's heart.

Immediately upon his and Sylvia's marriage, by way of celebrating their happiness, Jim Bone persuaded Amy White to go to a famous oculist in Atlanta to try the operation for cataract. She was accompanied in great state by the young people, Elbert pleading a pressure of business at the convening of the spring term of the court at Ruckersville as an excuse for remaining at home. Amy herself went to the adventure like one fearful of being awaked from a particularly

happy dream. She dreaded the failure of the operation, and it may be she dreaded in some indefinable occult fashion the long laid aside duty of seeing men and things literally and judging them accordingly.

As for Elbert, his state was pitiable. For so many years Amy had been the one person who loved him and believed in him. He had enjoyed the singular privilege of being wicked and worthless and at the same time seeing himself honoured and glorified with all the virtues and attributes of a hero in a good woman's regard. He dreaded the judgment of Amy's eyes as he did not fear the condemnation of God. Many a man has been in this predicament, and no shrewder torture can be invented for the damned.

On the day that he received the telegram from Jim Bone saying that the operation had been successfully performed and that the doctor entertained every hope that Amy would have her sight again, he was distracted with horror. For the first time in many years he was keenly alive to what he had become. One day he stood before the dusty mirror in Amy's room looking long and fearfully at his image there — the reflection of an old drunkard with bloated features, bleared, blood-shotten eyes, pimply red nose and sagging under lip. He straightened himself, tried to bow his back and make a proud figure. Then he sobbed. The expression of manhood that goes with such a carriage was gone.

In a few days the invalid was brought home with great triumph and set down in her dingy room, her

eyes still tightly bandaged, her heart fluttering with strange delight and stranger dread. She must remain absolutely in the dark for a week longer, the doctor had counselled, to insure her recovery and to prevent the strain of the light upon the nerves of sight, weakened by her long blindness.

Then Elbert remained at home. He neglected his precious "business" in spite of Amy's protests. He would not leave her a moment. He was like a prisoner enjoying his last reprieve from judgment and just punishment. He made abortive efforts to tidy up the old dishevelled house, much to her amusement as she heard him pattering about, casting things out of sight, and snuffing around awkwardly with a broom in dusty corners.

"Elbert, dear, what does it matter if things are in some confusion when these bandages are removed. I shall not see them. I shall see only *you!*"

"God!" groaned Elbert to himself, but to her he bantered cheerfully:

"Oh, I remember what a good housekeeper you were, and this old house is going to shine when you see it again. It's going to have a beam in its eye just for you!"

In vain she complained that he put everything where she could not find it.

"Never mind," he retorted, "when you get that bandage off you'll find them all in the right places, where you used to keep them."

He was jealous of every moment when visitors came

and prevented his being alone with her. He particularly resented Mrs. Martin, who regarded him and his preparations grimly, as much as to say she was glad his day of judgment was at hand. In fact, every eye in the village was on Elbert, some wonderingly, some pityingly, for all knew the illusions of Amy's blindness in regard to her husband.

At other times, when he was not busy "shining up the yard and garden," as he called it, he sat beside her talking in that high, half-witty, half-poetical vein in which no one else ever heard him speak, beguiling the time of her suspense, sometimes kissing her idle hands, for Amy had become strangely idle. She could no longer work with her beads. The mere anticipation of sight had destroyed her blind skill.

On one of these occasions as they sat together in the darkened room she said:

"Elbert, I want yours to be the very first face I see."

He bowed his head, his eyes filled.

"But, Amy Light," he answered, "that is what troubles me. You will be so disappointed. I — my God! I just can't bear for you to see *me!* I'm glad you are going to see everything else, but not me!"

"Hush!" she whispered, drawing the hideous old head down upon her breast; "that's all I'm thinking about, the joy of beholding your dear face — that and seeing the stars shine again.

"Elbert," she went on after a pause, while she stroked his old aigrette forelock softly, "now that I begin to think of such things, next to you I've missed

most the sight of the stars. I've been lonesome for them many a time, as if they were the home of my eyes. It's so plain to me why there are so many of them."

"Why?" asked Elbert.

"It's because *we* are immortal. And it takes a long time to be, when we never die. And we rarely spend, I reckon, more than threescore years and ten in one world, unless —" she smiled as if she had happened upon an engaging fancy—"unless the climate is unusually good! So there have to be myriads and myriads of planets to keep us comfortably going on with our business of always living, always hoping ourselves up out of the dust of one world into the breath and life of another!"

"But Amy, dear Light, you will see no change in the stars. That little flower garden constellation rises every night above the lilac hedge in the garden just as it did twenty years ago, every blessed one of 'em twinkling and waiting same as then for you to look at them and say, 'It is good!' And that damned old Venus hasn't faded a bit, shines every evening exactly like she used to shine after sundown when you saw her last. The Great Bear and the Little Dipper are right where you left off looking at 'em, as if you'd never turned a page or cast a year behind. And you, Amy, Heaven knows why, but *you* haven't changed the way other people change. You are beautiful, you are wonderful, as if God had just gone on making you over in His finer and finer images each day. But me, my dear, you can't expect a man of sixty-five to look like

the man of forty-five that you used to see. It's astonishing, my dear, how time changes the looks of a man. Er — it makes him ugly, Amy, and dull looking. My eyes — I never wanted to trouble you with it — but I've had some trouble with my eyes, and they are not clear now; they are inflamed. Seems to me I cannot bear that you should see how I've changed and gone down!"

"Now, Elbert," she laughed tenderly, "who would have thought a man could be so vain! Don't you know that no disguise of sickness or wrinkles or age could keep me from seeing you, the dear good heart who has been so patient and loving all these years to a useless blind woman?"

"But that's it, my Light. It is you who have been good and patient with me. I have not been so thoughtful as I ought to have been of you. I believe I've neglected you, Amy."

"Hush!" she said, and laid her hand upon his lips. "I've never allowed any one to find fault with my husband, and I'll not listen to it now at the very last from you. You know nothing about him. I reckon I am the only person in the world that knows how good and great a man Elbert White is."

In some such fashion as this ended every effort he made to prepare her for the shock of beholding him, so obviously the sot and vagabond. And a bridegroom never made more desperate resolutions to look his best than he made upon the fatal day when Amy's eyes should behold him again. He employed all his

spare time in preparation for this event. He purchased some clothes, giving his note for them, and a "lien" on two bags of cotton he received every autumn in rent upon a tiny farm that Amy owned in the "flat woods." He brushed his shoes, hunted up an old black string tie to go under his collar, and he laid all these things together with his clean clothes on a bed in the spare room, against the great day.

But a woman is like the weather. She trips by the clock. You may have every indication pointing that way and predict fair weather for to-morrow, then some little angel turns over the dew-box in heaven, and the floods descend, and you do not get the sunshine you had every reason to expect till the day after. Just so, you may foretell with certainty what a woman will do, and then she will contradict you if she gets the chance by doing it a day too soon, or after you have lost all hope of her doing it at all.

So it happened in Elbert's Amy prognostications. It was understood and written plainly in the doctor's orders that she should "try her eyes" on Sunday morning, May 7th, for the first time. This is why she did it on Saturday afternoon, May 6th, which is as near as any mortal woman can bear to come toward absolute obedience of any directions.

Elbert planned to rise early upon this terrible day, and devote the first hours of it to furbishing himself up for the occasion. He was resolved to leave no hair upon his head unturned in order to produce the best effect. Nevertheless, he was sorrowful beyond his

power to conceal even from Amy's blindness upon Saturday, and in the late twilight he excused himself with the pretence of going out to draw her a fresh bucket of water, saying that he would return presently with a gourdful for her to drink. As a matter of fact, when he reached an old bench beneath a mulberry tree in the back yard he was so overcome by his foreboding of the morrow that he set the bucket down, flung himself upon the bench and gave himself up to the desolation of coming despair.

Meanwhile, no sooner was he out of the room than Amy said to herself that she would surprise him. And, whatever else may be said of women, this is one thing they can do with an ingenuity that is never surpassed. God himself with all the forces of nature in the hollow of His hand does not begin to compete with any ordinary little duodecimal woman when it comes to surprising a man.

Amy stripped off the bandages from her eyes and sat slowly accustoming them in the dim light, gazing intently at first one object and then another with exquisite relish, sobbing with laughter as she made out the familiar back of an old rocking chair in which she had sat every day since her marriage, but had not seen for twenty years.

She did not move. There was enough in the sight of familiar objects about her to have made her happy for days. Besides, she was waiting for Elbert to come in. At last she thought she would go to the back door and see what had become of him. Her vision was

still weak and short, but she made out the figure of an old man upon the bench under the tree.

"Sir," she said, raising her voice a little, "can you tell me where Col. Elbert White is?"

"Amy!" cried Elbert, struggling to his feet, but not daring to advance, as he saw her coming toward him with her arms outstretched, her face lifted and her eyes fixed upon him as if she were still in the trance of blindness.

The next moment she held his face in her hands, the old mottled red face of a vagabond, and she stared at it adoringly. Then she kissed him silently, tenderly, with smiles between, as if she had a joke on him. Elbert was trembling, his eyes filled with tears.

"My dear," he sobbed at last, "how could you do it?"

"Do what?" she asked.

"Take me so by surprise. I'd aimed to fix up and look my best for this in the morning."

"Elbert," said Amy, with her ineffable smile, "you'll always look 'best' to me. Why, dear me! how could you malign yourself so to a blind woman! You had me thinking that maybe you'd be changed, but you are not. You have that same, that same — I do not know what it is, but it's the same! I am so glad!"

He lifted the corner of the little blue cashmere shawl pinned over her shoulders and wiped his eyes with it slowly, one, then the other. Then like an actor who has suddenly got his cue when he thought

he would never get it again, he looked over Amy's shoulder, turned her gently about, and pointed to a constellation of faintly shining stars just rising above the lilac hedge in the garden.

"See 'em! I do believe they've come up an hour earlier to-night just to greet you, Amy Light!" he said between a laugh and a sob.



The first part of the document discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions. It emphasizes that every receipt and invoice should be properly filed and indexed for easy retrieval. This is particularly crucial for businesses that deal with a large volume of transactions or those in highly regulated industries.

Next, the document addresses the issue of data security. In an era where digital records are the norm, it is essential to implement robust security measures to protect sensitive information. This includes using strong passwords, encrypting data, and regularly updating software to patch vulnerabilities.

The document also covers the topic of data backup. Regular backups are a critical component of any data management strategy. It advises businesses to create a backup schedule and store backups in a secure, off-site location to ensure data recovery in the event of a disaster.

Furthermore, the document discusses the importance of data retention policies. Not all data needs to be kept indefinitely. Establishing clear retention schedules helps in managing storage costs and ensures compliance with relevant regulations.

In conclusion, the document provides a comprehensive overview of best practices for data management. It stresses the need for a proactive approach to data handling, from initial collection to final disposal, to ensure the integrity and security of an organization's information assets.

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